

Support for Deaf Students in ESL/EFL Conversation Classes

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As more and more deaf students are enrolling in universities many feel it necessary for support in foreign language classes. Unfortunately, only a few are actually being supported. This paper was written to express the experience of having a deaf student in an English conversation class and the introduction of different methods to facilitate his learning. I hope it serves as a basic guide to assist language instructors with the same experience.

Introduction

The minute I got word of having a deaf student enroll in my conversation class, I was challenged. I did not want to give the student an alternative assignment instead of coming to class. I decided to do what any instructor would do. I decided to look into other cases of instructing a deaf student in an English conversation course in Japan. To my surprise, I could not find any material on past experiences written on the field of TEFL. Therefore, I had to broaden the search to deaf education. Luckily, we were introduced to hundreds of books and papers. Unluckily, none focused on teaching a foreign language conversation course. I feel many instructors have had or will have this experience, and a paper with concrete information amassed together would help in many ways.

Conversation Classes at University

Many deaf students are enrolling in high schools and universities making it relevant to keep similar goals¹. There are no concrete and specific goals pertaining to the English education curriculum for deaf students. The general education guidelines for the deaf students by the Ministry of Education (hereafter MEXT) state that students with disabilities should be educated to improve or overcome difficulties with proper knowledge, skill, attitudes, and understanding to live in society able to make the right judgments depending on individual status. English should be taught with the same goals². The goals of English education, as stated by MEXT, are to expand international understanding and achieve higher academic standards.

Communicative Language Teaching (hereafter CLT) is at the pinnacle of language education in many Japanese universities. The focus of MEXT is on the implementation of a program to improve communicative skills of the students after years of complaints about high-level reading and test-taking skills. Many universities have introduced a technique of CLT in compulsory English language courses in their curriculum. The minute goals of each university may differ, but the greater part is to gain communicative competence.

In the CLT classroom, instructors try to give students a chance to use English in real-life situation. Another aspect we see in many classrooms is the integration of the four language skills. Most classes are student-centered with activities in which the students interact in pairs, groups, or a class as a whole. The teacher, basically, acts as a facilitator, aside from the former instructions of grammar or pronunciation when necessary. Focusing the goal of communicative competence, most teaching is centralized on getting used to listening and speaking.

Basic Methods of Communication

There are several ways to communicate with a deaf student. Used frequently is writing, sign language, lip or speech reading, writing the letters in the air or the palm, and gestures. Unfortunately, not all deaf students know how to lip read or recognize

speech. Despite the advanced technology, hearing aids only make sounds louder. A hearing aid can help make sounds louder, but cannot process or distinguish words³.

A more concrete definition of the different styles of communication is in need. Interlocutors conveying information in the form of writing is said to be the most accurate form of communication, as long as the communicators have a pencil and paper handy. Sign Language is convenient unlike the time-consuming writing; however, both must be educated in the same sign language being used. That is to say, a person uses only American Sign Language might find it hard to communicate with a person who only knows Japanese Sign Language. Lip or speech reading was a focus in education of the deaf students in the past, but recently most students are not taught these methods. Writing letters in the air or on the palm is a familiar sight; keeping in mind, which way to write (facing the receiver or the sender), speed, and legibility. These are often used only for a few moments, and then disregarded because of the ambiguity as in lip or speech reading. Finally, gestures seem to be a good way of communicating. Unfortunately, some people are shy and cannot make big and exaggerated movements resulting in ambiguous movement. All forms of communication have its advantages and disadvantages. Choosing the appropriate form depends on the situation.

Support through Note-taking

Many universities have implemented a ‘volunteer’ note-taker system. This is usually an untrained student or faculty member. Note-taking is different from simply taking notes in class. Writing speed is one-fifth that of speech (an average person can speak 350-400wpm compared to the 70wpm of writing)⁴. The process of-- listening carefully-comprehend-get the gist-choose a form of writing-convey the information clearly-- is a complicated matter. Even a PC note-taker can only type 120-180wpm on average. The note-taker cannot simply just write everything the instructor says. They have to summarize it without changing its intended meaning. These notes are not the kind to be looked at later, but to understand what is going on at the moment. In other words, the note-taker gives pieces of information and the deaf student has to piece it all together like a jigsaw puzzle⁵.

Note-Taker in Conversation Classes

Do not be relieved just because there is a note-taker. Communication and understanding is the key. We don't mean for an instructor to change the whole syllabus because of a note-taker. The instructor should bear in mind that the note-taker is there for the instructor and not for the student. There is no need to translate anything you say into the first language.

It would be more polite to speak directly to the student instead of the note-taker. Signing or note-taking between the deaf student and the note-taker may be distracting at first, but the class should get used to it after two or three classes. It is important for the note-taker not to give their opinion when translating or when speaking in place of the deaf student. The note-taker should sit in between the student and the chalkboard, so the deaf student can see the instructor, note-taker, and the chalkboard simultaneously. Note-takers should not be used as proctors for tests and quizzes. Finally, you should always thank the note-taker after class, most are not experts in the target language of the class, but have helped in uncountable ways.

Other Teaching Strategies for Instructing Deaf Students

We shall try to list the things instructors should be aware of with or without support. The biggest problem an instructor will face is probably the difficulty in conveying a message. Exaggerated facial expression, gestures and other body language will facilitate comprehension. Before talking, it is important to get the attention of the student, and to communicate face to face with the student. Usually a tap on the shoulder or a waving hand should do the trick. Keep in mind those phrases such as “Okay, class.” or “Listen up.” to get attention will not help.

Visual aids are the student's primary means of receiving information. It can be in the form of drawings, flashcards, or a list with numbers for commands that you use a lot. These visual aids and the blackboard need to be legible, especially for assignments, due dates, exam dates, changes in class schedule, special events, etc. When a student has a question, request, or a problem, have them write it down and give it to you for written feedback. Providing an outline and instructions (other than the course outline that is given in the first class) of each lesson and activity in advance to give the student is very helpful.

A great deal of communication with a deaf student will be in the form of writing. First of all it is a good idea to break up long sentences, not using difficult vocabulary, pronouns, and abbreviations. You should also use simple conjunctions. When introducing difficult vocabulary, its meaning in parenthesis would aid comprehension. If other students are laughing at a joke, the deaf student might feel left out so we have to try and explain it in detail. Though varying culturally, the student should be allowed to point especially in discussions and conversation activities.

Many instructors are determined to finish the well thought out lesson plan, and start to pick up the pace when time is getting short. We should avoid this, for it will just cause confusion not only to the deaf student, but every student in the classroom. It would also help if the instructor does not pace around the classroom when giving explanations or instructions. When speaking to the class as a whole, it is best to stand where the deaf student can get a visual of you and the note taker in the same frame. It would be a good idea to point out or to the person who is speaking, instead of just calling out names.

To sum up we have included the list below to show the general considerations and strategies when instructing a deaf student. Keep in mind the more important idea of how we convey the information.

- Before talking get the attention of the student; i.e. a tap on the shoulder
- Use visual aids whenever possible; i.e. flashcards, pictures, etc
- Do not talk when writing or pacing the room
- Provide an course outline before the first day of class
- Provide outlines of each class and instructions for each activity
- Learn the first language signs for emergencies
- Consider seating the student in the front of the class and the note taker in between the instructor and the student
- Always keep a pen and paper ready for written conversations
- Do not let the student feel left out; i.e. jokes, digressions, skits, role-play, etc.
- Get feedback after every lesson to improve support
- Lesson will take longer than planned; rushing will only cause more confusion
- Use over exaggerated gestures, facial expression, lip movement, and talk slowly

Our Conversation Class

We all have to be prepared to accept a deaf student, and not just assign an alternative assignment. A further question instructors might have is on class content. Basically, where students had listening practice, the text would be in written form focusing on the reading and writing skills of the deaf student (i.e. speed reading to get used to real-time movie subtitles). ‘Not secluding’ the deaf student was another focus. Especially in oriental cultures in which an importance of being part of the group is emphasized, we tried to create a family atmosphere. This is connected with our goal of improving communication skill making the class more comprehensible for every student. Focusing on conveying the message seemed as though the students had forgotten the fact that they were using a foreign language and concentrated on how to convey the message (an aspect of in set conversation activities which is often overlooked).

I hope this gives insight to many instructors who are aiming to support deaf students in their foreign language classes.

Footnotes

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2. Nakanishi. *ibid*
3. Ochii. 1994. Educational Issues of the Deaf and Mute. Hearing-Impaired Magazine Vol. 1. January from, <http://www1.normanet.ne.jp/~ww100114/library/li-01.htm>.
4. Yoshikawa, Oota, Hirota, & Shiraishi. 2001. Introduction to Note Taking in Universities. Ningensya
5. Yoshikawa. *ibid*

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- Streng, A. H., Kretschmer, R. R. Jr., Kretschmer, L.W. (1978) Language, Learning, & Deafness Theory, Application, and Classroom Management Grune & Stratton 15-128
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