

Interpreting and Speech-to-Text Services in English Courses for International Students

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Abstract

International students who are Deaf / Hard of Hearing are appearing on U.S. campuses eager to learn American Sign Language (ASL) or improve their English skills. There are practical methods that campus disability services staff can use to interpret or provide speech-to-text services for international students with minimal skills in the target languages. Staff can assess these students and advise them on navigating new technologies, providing needed documentation, and adapting to U.S. culture.



Introduction

A Deaf/ Hard of Hearing student walks into your disability services office and needs services. Suppose that student is from Chile and she knows limited Chilean Sign Language because in her home country signing has historically been forbidden, professional interpreters are rare, and only recently has signing been allowed in classroom settings. Her English reading skills are at a moderate level. What will you do to communicate about what services she needs?

In situations like this, campus disability services staff quickly realize that communication requires adjusting to the international student's language skill level, encouraging universal teaching strategies, and trying out new services. Disability service providers who work with Deaf students can start by assessing the student's communication style, English/ASL skill level, and goals for being in the United States in order to provide appropriate services.

Aside from the details of language lessons, there are the broader adjustment issues that international students may face in entering a new culture. The process for acquiring accommodations, the differences in technology access and cultural perspectives, and the budgetary concerns and solutions are important to consider. Also, Deaf/Hard of Hearing services staff can use some of the resources that are available related to intensive English language learning for Deaf and Hard of Hearing students.

Background

If an international student is enrolled on a U.S. university or college campus; if she has a student ID card for campus; if the program, no matter what it is, is physically located on the campus; and if the student is paying any kind of fees for the dorm or meal plans, etc., then that U.S. university or college is liable for paying for any needed disability services for that student. With ten percent of U.S. postsecondary students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing being international students

(National Survey on Student Engagement, 2006), this requires a combination of advance consideration and quick planning.

Language Assessments

“Now, for me I flew here, and upon my arrival it was a huge culture shock because American culture is so different from South American culture. And when I got to the University, I went to the disability office, but they weren’t sure how to work with me as I was their first signing international student.”

There are several recommended steps to take when international students who are Deaf and need services arrive on campus. An English language assessment should be done, if it was not done in the home countries. Some students work to improve their English skills before they arrive, but still may need some assistance/support to improve in that area. If they completed a Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) evaluation, those scores should be available to the disability services staff through the program the students are entering on campus.

Next, staff can look at what kind of signing skills the student has, whether he is skilled in American Sign Language (ASL) already; whether he uses a Pidgin Sign English (PSE) or Signed Exact English (SEE); or whether he doesn’t have any kind of sign language skills. Also, staff can assess if the student knows his home country sign language, or if he has any speech-reading skills for his home country language or English.

And then staff can find out what kind of general communication skills the student has. Staff can informally evaluate how the student communicates. Maybe the international student doesn’t have any speech-reading skills or any signing skills, per se, or any English, but staff can assess how the student communicates when sitting down one on one. Lip-reading skills are an option, but for some international Deaf students, it can be difficult to lip-read English if English is not their native language. Sometimes staff can use gestures to get the point across.

“Now, how did my Deaf friends learn English in the USA? This is what they shared with me. If you can imagine a triangle and a circle and a square with colors – the triangle would be the subject, you would have the circle as the object, and would you have the square as the verb. And so there was a lot of manipulation of these three components of English, and because they were in color I could see the shapes as well as the color, and that helped me to understand the language better and then be able to put it in ASL. And, again, that helped them in learning the language and helped them to improve their English.”

Services

Next, staff can think about appropriate services for the student. Consider if the student could use an ASL interpreter, a Certified Deaf Interpreter (CDI), a note taker, speech-to-text services in the foreign language or English, or other services. Based on the Deaf international student’s language skills, staff can determine what might be the best services for a particular student. If the student is Hard of Hearing rather than Deaf, and she came to the U.S. to learn English, staff can consider speech-to-text services because she wants English; she doesn’t want ASL initially.

“They offered me speech-to-text services, and that was okay, but when the teacher wanted to ask me a question directly, they didn’t know what to do. So, I didn’t have equal access to my classmates. We used paper, which was a very lengthy process, and I had to say that it was not an equal access environment, and I was very frustrated with it. And so, they brought somebody in to translate from Spanish to

English for me. But I still didn't have the English skills to communicate what I knew. It was a very slow process. I knew English, and so there would be speech-to-text, but if there were a lot of conversation going on in the classroom, I would miss the information."

Some international Deaf students come to the U.S. to learn ASL. Staff can usually get that out of an informal individual assessment. Sometimes an international Deaf student might want other services but he might not know about them initially. Staff can go through and show him all of the different services that are offered on the campus that he might never have seen before in his home country.

On an individual basis, staff can also consider the cultural considerations so the student can receive the best services possible from the disability services office and in the classroom setting. Staff can review the student applications and encourage students who contact them to fill out additional information to help avoid misunderstandings and find out more about the country they are coming from. Details requested could include the kind of communication a student uses at home; if the student is part of the Deaf community or the hearing community there; if she grew up in a hearing family; if her family signed; the type of school she attended; if the student has family in U.S.; how long she has been in the U.S.; if she is familiar with American culture, etc.

"I recommend that campus interpreting services has available Certified Deaf interpreters. It's an important service to provide for the Deaf international students, particularly when they first arrive on campus and they don't know ASL. That would give them the opportunity to learn the language."

The disability services staff can also include the campus international student office. Staff can contact them to ask about cultural information, find other students from the same country, or gather other information that is helpful to determine appropriate services.

The Classroom Setting

Staff next can think about the kind of academic program the student is entering. Is it going to be a general university class, or some kind of an intensive English program? These are very different. Staff can consider content and what kind of students are going to be in that class.

Intensive English programs are full of international students. Maybe the student will feel more comfortable in this environment with other international students. General university classes are very different. And then there is the style of instruction. Is the course instructor going to be a regular university professor who talks quickly and makes it difficult for the student to understand anything? Or is going to be an English language teacher who is used to adjusting his lessons to the language level of the students?

Disability services staff can meet with the faculty or the intensive English instructors. Staff can find out if the faculty or instructors have any previous experience with Deaf and Hard of Hearing students, if they know anything about the culture, if they have any resources, or if they have worked with interpreters or speech-to-text providers before. Staff can explain the services that will be provided in the classroom so the instructors understand what to expect.

Later, disability services staff can inform the student of any additional resources on campus and in the community, such as clubs on campus, local host family programs, Deaf community programs and meetings.

“They helped me to know where to find other deaf people. They helped me connect. And that really gave me a sense of peace, and I didn't know their Signs, and they didn't know my Signs, but we were still able to bond.”

Community Connections

It can be a pivotal and positive shift for international students when the campus disability staff offers community resources to Deaf international students to help them make contacts in the community outside the campus. Staff can give them information about local Deaf organizations so they can connect with peers and learn about U.S. Deaf culture, especially if there are not many Deaf students on campus. Staff can also provide ASL course information if the campus does not offer that course and it is needed.

“I went to learn ASL with a Deaf teacher. I was doing this simultaneous to taking the course with the speech-to-text provider and everything else. And my level of frustration was just incredible. But within a year, I had learned to communicate with the Deaf community in Chicago. My communication skills improved drastically, so then the university was able to provide me an ASL interpreter and I was able to actually participate in the lectures to give responses and to share my opinions.”

If the students don't make other social/peer contacts, they can become isolated. Staff reported that students often take a lot of classes, and study continuously so they don't have to go out and make friends because of their concern about their limited English and communication skills.

Isolation can affect administrators and service providers because students may feel that those individuals are the only people who really understand and the only people who can really communicate with them. It can lead to an unhealthy attachment to usually the interpreters or the speech-to-text providers, or the disability service office.

The National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE), administered by Mobility International USA, is one community resource available for Deaf international students as well as campus disability staff. The NCDE is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State to serve as a comprehensive one-stop resource for disability providers, international exchange staff, and people with disabilities or who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing related to making arrangements for people with disabilities to participate in study, work, intern, volunteer, research, or teach abroad programs. This includes international students and English language students with disabilities who come to the United States from other countries. From online tip sheets and success stories to one-on-one information and referral services, the NCDE provides free assistance when reached through their website at: <http://www.miusa.org/ncde>.

“I finished my graduate degree courses, and am actually in the process of writing my thesis analyzing Deaf Chilean students. I am advocating working in the University as a graduate student, particularly through the office of disability services in providing communication access and counseling. It's been a very good experience for me.”

Conclusion

Having international students who are Deaf on a U.S. university campus brings diversity enrichment to the campus. Services can be expensive if you are providing a lot of services, but it is wonderfully enriching for the hearing students, the Deaf students, and everybody on campus. Staff can work with the student to provide the best possible academic accommodation services, but also

seek out help and assistance from other community resources such as the NCDE and local Deaf community organizations to assist with cultural and social issues.

References

National Survey on Student Engagement. (2006). Unpublished analysis furnished by Rick Shoup, Research Analyst, National Survey of Student Engagement/Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, accessed and reported by National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange, Mobility International USA.

