
Overcoming Communication Barriers: Communicating with Deaf People

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ABSTRACT

THERE IS NO TYPICAL deaf or hard-of-hearing person. Deaf and hard-of-hearing patrons come from diverse backgrounds and use differing communication modes. Librarians can best communicate with and serve these individuals by learning and applying basic communication skills. Information on deafness and deaf people is presented, as are easily learned skills that are effective in communicating with deaf people in general.

INTRODUCTION

Librarians typically meet and interact with a wide variety of people. While providing information to library patrons, most librarians will inevitably encounter deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals. But when one has little or no experience in communicating with a deaf person, it is only natural to feel awkward and uncomfortable. How can communication be enhanced? How can one know whether a message is understood or not? How will one understand a person whose speech is unintelligible?

This article provides insights on deafness, deaf people, and basic communication skills. Minor modifications to the manner in which

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one converses can facilitate communication with deaf people, greatly enhance the mutual comfort level of library personnel and deaf patrons alike, and lead to more productive interaction.

BACKGROUND

Terminology

In this article, the word *deaf* is used in two senses. In a broad sense, *deaf* includes all individuals with any degree of hearing loss, but particularly people who cannot understand spoken messages through hearing alone. Additionally, the capitalized word *Deaf* is used by some authors to refer to profoundly deaf people whose community and culture are based on common experiences—such as growing up in institutions for the deaf—and a common language—American Sign Language (ASL).

Hard-of-hearing refers to individuals who have some usable hearing. They can comprehend speech to some extent with or without a hearing aid and generally depend on speechreading, facial expression, and gestures to supplement what is heard.

Deafness and Deaf People

Over the course of their lifetimes, millions of Americans live with some degree of hearing loss. Those who are born with profound deafness are in the minority, but they still comprise many thousands of individuals. Significantly larger numbers lose part or all of their hearing later in life—at any time from infancy onward.

A number of different factors determine the impact of deafness or hearing loss on the individual. These include the type and severity of the loss, the age of onset of hearing loss, and whether the loss is sudden or gradual. Schooling, life experiences, personality, and communication preferences are other determinants of an individual's adjustment to deafness and his communication style and skills.

Causes of hearing loss are diverse. Common etiologies include genetics, illness, trauma, exposure to excessively loud sounds over a period of time, and gradual deterioration due to aging.

Severity of hearing loss may range from slight to profound deafness (where the individual literally cannot hear any sounds). Moreover, there are different types of hearing loss, such as middle ear problems or nerve deterioration or damage. More often than not, hearing impairment will entail greater difficulty in detecting certain frequencies than others within the spectrum of audible sound. For example, if someone has difficulty hearing high frequencies (as opposed to low or mid-range frequencies), the sound of the final *s* that forms the plural of many words is often entirely missed.

Modern hearing aids can be adjusted to some extent to compensate for uneven hearing loss over the range of audible frequencies, particularly when the severity of loss is minimal. In such cases, hearing with an aid may be close to normal. However, when the hearing loss is severe, even a powerful aid may not be able to compensate evenly for losses which are distributed across the entire audible frequency spectrum. The result is that sounds are distorted and, therefore, harder to recognize and distinguish. The greater the severity of loss, the less effective a hearing aid is in helping an individual receive and understand information through sound alone, and the more the individual must rely on speechreading, manual communication, gestures, writing, or all of these methods to communicate with hearing people.

The age at which an individual experiences a hearing loss or becomes deaf has a great impact on language acquisition. Language is ordinarily acquired through the frequent and repeated exposure to speech which begins in infancy. An individual who learns speech and language patterns through such early exposure will normally retain and continue to use them even if his or her hearing deteriorates later in life. On the other hand, developing speaking skills is infinitely harder and slower for someone born deaf. It is extremely difficult to learn to produce sounds that cannot be heard and which may also be difficult or impossible to read from a speaker's lips. An individual who is born with moderate hearing loss or who experiences such loss early in life will hear imperfectly, which often results in corresponding difficulties with English.

Communication Modes

Adding to the diversity previously described are disparate communication modes and preferences. In the United States and elsewhere, communication methodology has been hotly debated among both deaf and hearing people for over a century. Even today, educators, doctors, parents, and deaf people still argue over whether deaf children should be encouraged and taught to communicate through speech and speechreading only, in American Sign Language, in a modified version of signed English, or by a combination of methods.

Younger deaf library users (particularly children, college students, and young adults) will most likely know and use at least some sign language in their everyday communication. This is less true of people who experience hearing loss later in life.

Obviously, there is no typical deaf person. Rather, there is a tremendous diversity among those individuals with any degree of hearing loss.

Misconceptions about Deafness and Deaf People

Misconceptions about deaf people are common among hearing people who have little or no contact with deaf individuals. The same is true about the various means used by deaf people to communicate among themselves and with their hearing counterparts. For example, good speech is not necessarily an indication that speakers can also hear well. People who lose their hearing later in life may speak almost perfectly in spite of profound deafness. Late-deafened adults lose the ability to monitor their own speech, which results in a deterioration of speech quality. Sometimes this deterioration leads others to suspect a speech impairment rather than the deafness that actually causes it.

A common first question asked of deaf people is, "Can you lip-read?" Although most deaf people do get information from lip movements, skill, experience, and comfort in speechreading vary tremendously. Very few deaf people develop sufficient speechreading skill for it to become their primary means of understanding others. Some deaf individuals may speechread so well that hearing people may be unaware of, or forget, their deafness. Other deaf individuals may experience so much difficulty with speechreading that they will depend more or less exclusively on other means of communication.

Wearing a hearing aid does not necessarily imply that the wearer can "hear" in the sense of understanding speech. In cases of severe impairment, wearing a hearing aid may be of little value beyond alerting the wearer to environmental sounds which are in themselves unintelligible.

COMMUNICATION WITH DEAF PEOPLE

Speaking and Facial Expression

Although speaking louder to a deaf or hard-of-hearing person is a natural inclination, it rarely, if ever, enhances comprehension. A profoundly deaf person will still hear nothing no matter how loudly a message is spoken. Additionally, a hearing aid wearer may experience both distortion and pain when shouting or when abnormally loud speech is amplified.

Leaning forward or speaking into a deaf person's ear are also natural—but counterproductive—responses to deafness. When this occurs, speechreading becomes harder or impossible for the deaf person because of the difficulty in focusing on the speaker's mouth. Again, if the deaf person is wearing a hearing aid, the aid may amplify speech to a painful level as well as possibly distort the sound.

The use of facial expression appropriate to the desired meaning and tone of a message is of considerable help in communicating with

deaf people. Speakers who use facial expression, gestures, and animation to supplement spoken messages will generally be much more readily understood than those who do not.

Facial expressions are also crucial in conveying the intensity of a message. They modify a signed message in a manner analogous to the way adjectives and adverbs modify spoken English. Whether the speaker is mildly amused, delighted, or hysterical, his thoughts might be expressed in essentially the same signs, but facial expressions convey the mood intended. Overcoming any personal or cultural biases that inhibit the expression of feeling through facial expression and body language will convey the intended weight and meaning of a message to deaf patrons much more effectively.

Speechreading

Lipreading entails deducing verbal messages through watching lip movements. Speechreading, on the other hand, not only encompasses lipreading—its most important component—but also incorporates many other visual clues which assist in understanding the spoken message. Such clues include facial expression, gestures, pantomime, rate of delivery, and eye contact. Even hearing people develop and use some speechreading ability, often unconsciously, especially when background noise interferes with hearing.

Deaf people vary greatly in their ability to speechread. The individual's recognition vocabulary is a primary factor in effective speechreading, as are the preferred communication style and the amount of experience and practice in speechreading. Speechreading might be considered an art as well as a skill, because many sounds of spoken English are not visible or readily discernable on the lips. Some distinct sounds (such as those of the consonants *b*, *p*, and *m*) are difficult or impossible to distinguish without contextual clues. Stuttering and accents interfere with speechreading as do visual interferences and distractions, including (but not limited to) a bushy moustache or people or objects moving in the background.

Considerable guessing and the synthesis of visual clues are necessary in piecing together a message through speechreading. Missing a key word can make an entire sentence incomprehensible. Keeping sentences short, emphasizing key words, and paraphrasing may enhance speechreading comprehension for some deaf individuals.

Words must be familiar to be recognizable on the lips. A broad, well-established language base is therefore essential for effective speechreading. Words that are unfamiliar or out of context for a particular situation may be missed or misunderstood. Sudden changes in the direction of a conversation may be difficult to follow.

Speechreading requires intense concentration and can therefore be extremely tiring even over the space of a few minutes. And, when so many variables are involved, deaf people will not speechread equally well under all circumstances. Fortunately, the typical library environment, often characterized by good lighting and with relatively few visual and auditory distractions, is usually conducive to speechreading.

Sign Language

The use of gestures is a natural way for many people to communicate. Gestures are as old as mankind. Italians, among other people, are noted for the expressiveness of their gestures in conversations. A type of sign language also enabled Indian tribes to communicate with other tribes whose spoken languages were different.

American Sign Language is a formal sign language that has evolved from a French system that was introduced into the United States in the nineteenth century and used at that time to teach deaf children. Linguistic studies have shown recently that ASL has a complex, systematic syntax of its own which differs dramatically from that of English. Moreover, the order in which concepts are signed and the ways in which they are modified are considerably different.

In recent years, ASL has been recognized as a language in its own right. Many deaf people, as well as organizations such as the National Association of the Deaf, have become increasingly assertive in advocating ASL as both their language of choice and of instruction.

In the 1970s, William Stokoe, a Cornell University researcher, originated a system of symbols that accurately describe the finger, hand, face, and body movements that constitute ASL. His efforts, combined with much greater acceptance of ASL as a language suitable and appropriate for the instruction of deaf people, have resulted in the publication of various dictionaries and instructional material on ASL. This in turn has led to greater standardization of ASL throughout the United States.

Simultaneous communication describes the combination of ASL components (most particularly the signs for specific concepts) with finger spelling, the well-defined enunciation of words on the lips (to facilitate speechreading), speech, facial expression, and gestures. This approach to communication (both to and among deaf people) tends to follow more closely the syntax and word order of English. Deaf people who normally use only ASL when communicating among themselves may attempt to use speech and a word order more closely resembling English in communicating with hearing people.

Learning Sign Language

Sign language classes are offered by many schools, colleges, and universities, as well as by organizations serving the deaf community,

to those interested in developing basic sign language skills. Many bookstores offer books on sign language, pictorial dictionaries, manuals that explain usage and word order, and signs for specific subject areas. However, as in learning any other new language, extensive practice is necessary to develop proficiency in manual communication. Interaction with a knowledgeable instructor and with deaf people is far preferable to self instruction because motion, mime, facial expression, intensity, and other visual clues are such important components of sign language communication.

However, even the use of finger spelling (that is, the manual alphabet, which is simple and easy to learn) can make a tremendous positive difference in communicating basic information to a deaf person. So can learning and using a few signs relevant to the messages most often conveyed. This is all the more true if one is careful to verify the correctness of the signs before routinely using them.

Any appropriate use of sign language conveys an additional message to a deaf person who relies on it for understanding—the willingness and desire to communicate. If asked, many deaf people will gladly provide helpful feedback to someone who is learning sign language. In communities with large concentrations of deaf people, it may be possible to find a knowledgeable individual who could evaluate one's skills more formally and provide feedback as to appropriate or inappropriate communication strategies.

Writing to Communicate

Writing is one of the best ways to get a message across to a deaf person, especially when speech does not seem to be conveying the desired message. Writing information is particularly helpful when the message is detailed or when accuracy is essential.

Because ASL word order is considerably different from that of English, individuals whose primary language is sign encounter some of the same difficulties with English as do others for whom English is a second language. Qualifiers other than tenses, adjectives, and adverbs are used to modify ASL messages. Thus the writing of deaf individuals sometimes exhibits errors somewhat comparable to writing errors of other non-native users of English. Questioning and paraphrasing by both hearing and deaf persons can help clarify the intent and meaning of a written message when necessary.

OPTIMIZING CONDITIONS FOR GOOD COMMUNICATION

Managing the Communication Environment

Good lighting, appropriate position, unobstructed vision, and minimizing distractions are essential to optimal speechreading. Although a resourceful and assertive deaf individual will try to

position himself in such a way as to be able to understand as much of a conversation with another person as possible, there is also much that a speaker can do to optimize communication. Many of the suggestions to follow hold true regardless of the deaf person's preferred communication mode.

Whenever possible, the speaker should:

- move so that the main light source shines directly on his or her face. Backlighting, which silhouettes the speaker's face, makes speechreading difficult or impossible.
- be in a position so that his or her face is at the same, or at a slightly higher, level than the deaf person's.
- maintain eye contact. As difficult as this may be in some cultures, this is of great importance.

General Suggestions for Interactive Communication

An individual's deafness, communication skills, and preferences remain invisible until he or she begins to communicate. How a deaf client initiates communication in another's presence provides clues as to how the client prefers to communicate in a new situation. This may be through speech, a note, gestures, or a signed message. Communication occurs through many channels other than just speech or sign language. Gestures, mime, facial expression, writing, and even drawing can be used to communicate. The less a person hears, the more important visual aids become in facilitating understanding.

It is best to respond using whatever communication techniques seem most appropriate and are most comfortable for the speaker at the moment. Through experience and with background information of the kind presented in this article, hearing people may develop the ability to recognize and adapt to the deaf person's communication needs and preferences more skillfully.

The following tips will help in communicating with deaf patrons:

- Always get the deaf person's attention first before starting any communication. This may be accomplished by moving into the other's line of sight, by touching the patron gently on the arm or shoulder, or by using other means that seem appropriate under the circumstances.
- Speak in a normal tone of voice. Don't shout. Shouting may embarrass the other person by drawing attention to his or her disability.
- Enunciate words distinctly but without exaggeration. Exaggeration changes the appearance of speech on the lips to the point where words may actually become harder to recognize. Try not to mumble.

- Speak at a moderate uniform rate. Slow down delivery only enough to be able to enunciate clearly. Extremely slow or excessively rapid speech may be harder to speechread.
- Paraphrase messages when appropriate. If one or two repetitions of a word, phrase, or sentence do not seem to convey the message, try synonyms. Emphasize the key words in the message. Alternatively, try finger spelling or writing.
- Use any gestures that seem appropriate in helping to convey the desired message or meaning. For example, opening one's hands as one would open a book has a clear meaning and is actually the ASL sign for "book."
- Minimize behaviors that make speechreading more difficult, such as gum chewing or eating while speaking. Also minimize head or body movements unless they reinforce a spoken message.
- Start communication by carefully enunciating a message and maintaining eye contact with the deaf patron. Use whatever gestures or signs (or both) that seem appropriate. Writing a message is frequently helpful if other communication means do not seem to be effective.

Because of the diverse nature of hearing loss and of social, language, and educational experiences, there may be marked differences in communication preferences from one deaf person to another. Even though any proficiency in sign language on the part of a hearing person demonstrates caring and commitment to communicating, not every deaf person necessarily knows sign language or appreciates its use. Some deaf people still prefer to rely on speech and speechreading, especially if they themselves are not proficient in the use of sign communication.

When one has developed a repertoire of communication skills, ask deaf patrons which communication mode or modes they prefer. This is appropriate and will be appreciated by deaf patrons.

CONCLUSION

As this article demonstrates, there are many straightforward commonsense things one can do to facilitate communication with deaf people. The desire to communicate and the willingness to adapt as well as possible to the communication needs of the individual deaf person are more important than extensive sign language training. Positive experiences in communicating with deaf individuals will more often than not quickly enhance one's comfort level in such situations.

A number of books published recently focus on coping strategies for both deaf adults and hearing people who want to enhance their

communication with deaf people. Some of these works are listed at the end of this article under "Suggested Readings."

SUGGESTED READINGS

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