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Kathryn Schmitz

Susan Keenan

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Evaluating Deaf Students' Writing Fairly: Meaning Over Mode

To fairly evaluate the writing of deaf and hard-of-hearing students, instructors should focus on the meaning, not the developmental errors, contained within the text.

Introduction

Competence in written English is essential for success at work in the United States. For deaf and hard-of-hearing people[1], especially for those who do not use spoken language, the ability to express themselves in writing with competence assures clear communication with hearing people. However, learning how to do so presents challenges for both deaf students and those who instruct them. More than 25,000 deaf students are enrolled in post-secondary programs around the United States, many of them community colleges. The challenges faced by this special population of college students in writing clear English must be understood in order to appreciate the surrounding issues that affect how instructors can fairly evaluate the writing of their deaf students.

Most deaf students are much more facile at expressing themselves in American Sign Language (ASL) or a variant than in written English, despite the fact that for most, English is the native language of their parents. By the time these students reach college, they have spent years struggling with the grammatical intricacies of English. Demands placed on students at this educational level to produce a variety of written work are great. However, despite years of instruction, many remain unable to produce clear, error-free texts. As a result, students in this population may seek help in revising or editing their work.

From the instructor's perspective the issues with deaf students' texts are twofold. The first centers on the kind and amount of help students receive with revisions. The

second is how to fairly evaluate the written work of this population knowing that it will likely be fraught with grammatical problems.

English vs. ASL

The English used by deaf students presents a situation unique in terms of acquisition. The majority of deaf children in the United States – more than 95 % – are born to hearing parents (Mitchell; Mitchell and Karchmer). However, because of their hearing loss, these children usually do not natively acquire even the basics of their parents' language, relying instead on gestures, home signs and isolated words to convey their thoughts (Charrow and Fletcher; Luetke-Stahlman). These deaf children, then, cannot be viewed as native users of English because the English they learn is neither acquired from their primary caregivers, nor acquired in the manner of their hearing counterparts (Luetke-Stahlman; Padden and Humphries; Swisher). Neither, however, is ASL or any form of signed English initially shared between hearing parent and deaf child, at least in any fluent manner. Most hearing parents have no skills in manual communication, and even if they immediately embrace ASL, they are learning the language along with the child and thus cannot be viewed as native-like users.

According to Lindfors, a child acquires the language of his community. Because, however, most young deaf children most often have access neither to the hearing nor the deaf community, it is difficult to identify any language as a first language. Bochner and Albertini use the term "primary" rather than first language to describe the English this population acquires although they view it as a "variegated form" (25). The vast majority of the literature, however, is vague on the identification of what constitutes a first language (L1) and, therefore, a second language (L2) for deaf children. This may be in

part because there is no consensus on definitions for the terms "native language", "primary language" and "language acquisition." Or, it may be that because of variables such as degree and kind of hearing loss, age of onset of deafness and educational setting, a generalization simply cannot apply for this population.

The absence of any natively learned first language as well as absence of access to any spoken form of a language impacts most deaf students' knowledge and use of English. Some research supports the notion that deaf students' English most closely resembles that of hearing children six to ten years younger (Kempt and Maxwell; Quigley and Paul). Berent, however, states that once the deaf child has a "functional – though only partial L1 (in this case English) – learning proceeds educationally . . . in much the same way that L2 learning proceeds" (134). Deaf children's linguistic behavior, then, may best be understood in terms of delayed L1 behavior and L2 development (Berent; Bochner). This notion is supported by increasing evidence that many, although not all, deaf students' English errors are similar to those made by hearing nonnative speakers (Langston and Maxwell; Quigley and Paul; Strong).

Despite the similarities found in deaf students' and nonnative speakers' use of English, there are significant differences between ASL and many spoken languages that pose additional problems for the deaf. The most conspicuous difference is that ASL has no written form. Reading, then, for deaf students becomes a task of making sense of a print form which has no usable aural counterpart and for which they have no model in their manual language. Many deaf students whose pre-college educational experiences do not provide sufficient and intensive exposure to reading and writing often are at a

disadvantage using written English if they rely on sign language for their primary communicative mode.

A second difference between ASL and English is dimensionality. ASL is a three-dimensional language, the signs made by making movements in space. It is both dimensions of space as well as the movements that are used for grammatical processes. That is, inflections in ASL are made by superimposing temporal and spatial contrasts that affect the movement of signs (Klima and Bellugi 274). For example, ASL makes use of deixis or pointing for referential indexing. One way reference is managed in English is through the use of pronouns. ASL manages pronominal reference by superimposing the pronoun on the verb through directionality. This means to sign the sentence *I ask you*, the verb *ask* is made moving the hand away from the signer and toward the referent. Written English, on the other hand, is linear. It follows an SVO pattern with morphological modification occurring primarily through affixation (Klima and Bellugi). Grammatical and syntactical principles, then, of one language do not map onto the other. Such differences between the languages frequently are not well understood by deaf students and result in errors that can render their written language confusing for the reader.

Grammar

Deaf students' writing has been characterized as disfluent (Marschark, Mouradian and Halas). Such disfluency is in large part due to two types of errors: developmental errors and errors unique to deaf students' texts. Developmental errors are errors produced by students who are learning English as a second language. These developmental errors are similar to those made by young children learning English

natively and, as such, are resolved as the student's English proficiency grows. Some, though not all, of these errors can also be labeled surface errors since they are phonological in nature.

Six developmental error categories have been identified by Dulay, Burt and Krashen. These are: a) omitting grammatical morphemes which do not contribute meaning, e.g., *She opened present*; b) double marking a feature when only one marker is needed, e.g., *She didn't walked home*; c) generalizing rules, e.g., *oxes* for *oxen*; d) archiforms, or using one form in place of several, e.g., *Her dance with Bill*; e) using two or more forms in random alternation, e.g., using he and she randomly regardless of the gender of the person in question; and f) misordering items in constructions, e.g., *What you are doing?* (138-9). It may be worth noting here that the above kinds of errors occur because the student has an incomplete second language rule system. As the student builds his rule system, he is able to self-correct these developmental errors. However, teaching specifically to these errors will do little to reduce their occurrence if that portion of the rule system is not yet in place.

In addition to developmental errors, there are other characteristics of deaf students' writing, some of which are not shared by hearing learners of English as a second language. When compared to texts of hearing counterparts, the texts of deaf students are described as shorter (Bochner and Albertini). Such brevity occurs for several important reasons. First, and perhaps most intuitively obvious is that deaf students simply use fewer words and clauses per T-unit (Klecan-Aker and Blondeau), where a T-unit is taken to mean a group of words that can function as a sentence (Yoshinago-Itano and Snyder). The use of fewer clauses is not surprising given that deaf students appear to

have difficulty understanding relationships between major propositions within a text (Maxwell and Falick). Nor is the use of fewer words surprising. Deaf students have been found to have a small vocabulary, generally one lexical item per referent (Albertini and Schley).

A second reason for this brevity is sparser use of minor propositions. A minor proposition can be defined as "being composed of a relation that can be a modifier or connective and an argument that is usually an action or agent" (Yoshinago-Itano and Snyder 79). This means that deaf students employ unembellished agent/action forms when they express themselves in writing.

Besides the inclusion of fewer minor propositions, deaf students' text cohesion differs significantly from that of their hearing counterparts (Albertini and Schley). Cohesion is a system of connective devices that help the reader follow the progression of the text (Yoshinago-Itano and Snyder). Yoshinago-Itano and Snyder have identified five kinds of cohesive devices: a) reference, b) substitution, c) ellipsis, d) conjunction, and e) lexical (79). DeVilliers found that, in general, deaf students used fewer cohesive devices than their hearing counterparts. A study by Maxwell and Falick, however, found that while there were not significant quantitative differences between hearing and deaf students' use of these devices, there were qualitative differences. Deaf students' use of cohesive devices was very basic. They almost exclusively used *and, then* and *because* to conjoin ideas while hearing students used a much greater variety. Maxwell and Falick attribute this finding to the manner in which deaf children are taught English. According to these researchers, deaf students are traditionally taught grammatical structures out of context. As a result, although students can reproduce the particular structure, they lack

understanding of how that structure functions in a text. Without understanding relationships within sentences, deaf students tend to limit their use of connectives to the few with which they feel confident, frequently using them incorrectly.

Deaf students, then, face a twofold problem in terms of their written English. They make developmental errors because they are learning English in more formal settings, much as many second language learners do. In time, for most deaf students, such developmental errors are resolved, or at least significantly diminish. They also produce deep structure errors, or errors at the semantic level which can significantly interfere with their message. These errors can be attributed in part to reduced input and in part to the manner in which this population is taught (Maxwell and Falick).

Types of assistance

In the process of writing academic papers and essays, students frequently seek assistance. Such assistance can range from simple proofreading to extensive editing achieved either without student input or through one-on-one conferences. In all of these instances, the instructional goal is for the student, deaf or hearing, to ultimately be the author of his or her work, with minimal intervention from others.

Proofreading, also known as copyediting, most instructors would agree, is an essential component of preparing academic writing for evaluation. Proofreading is the act of reading and marking corrections in a piece of writing, and all writers need to proofread their work and make corrections before submitting it. Proofreading is generally limited to correcting typographical, spelling, and minor grammatical errors. The kinds of grammatical errors that could reasonably fall under the proofreading aegis are the six developmental error categories noted above. In general, proofreading is a

common activity for deaf students to request from others and should not require extensive time or effort.

However, often, basic proofreading will not provide sufficient support to deaf students toward improving their writing. The writing may exhibit more severe grammatical errors or organizational problems that simply cannot be addressed through proofreading. These errors require editing.

Editing by nature involves more significant alteration of original text and can address grammatical as well as organizational problems. Editing conducted in the form of a one-on-one conference can offer instructional and learning opportunities for resolving these problems. However, editing by someone other than the author, accomplished outside the conference context can be counterproductive (Shin). Editing of this kind does not promote any real improvement in writing despite the instructor's best intentions primarily because it does not teach the student how to identify and correct his own errors (Shin). More importantly, the exclusionary nature of such editing does not allow the student to interact with his text in meaningful ways and thus to develop a sense of ownership.

Deaf students' insufficient mastery of English frequently prevents them from communicating their message clearly in writing. As noted above, these difficulties can be grammatical, but they also can be semantic and structural in nature. An instructor familiar with his deaf student's writing can, in a one-on-one writing/editing conference, attempt to find a common ground where the student can work on his particular problems and improve his ability to write clearly. Writing is an ongoing process, not a one-time experience, especially in college, so students need to be given time and experience to

improve their skills. Improvement and growth are more likely to happen with the support of writing conferences than in isolation.

Sometimes deaf students who struggle with written English will ask a peer or another person to "translate" their signed communication into written English. The process of expressing oneself in writing is very different from expressing oneself in a spoken or a signed language. Consequently, translation by anyone other than the original speaker from ASL to English is not the student's English. The same principle applies to foreign students learning English as a second (or third or fourth) language.

In one case, a college instructor was working with a deaf student assigned to write several research papers. The writing quality in the student's initial papers was fairly poor, not unexpected with a culturally deaf person whose proficiency in English is incomplete. The student's final paper, however, was outstanding, with almost perfect grammar and organization. When asked about this incongruity, the student stated that he had written the paper as he normally would, then asked a friend/colleague to "translate" the paper into proper English.

One perspective holds that what the instructor read in that final draft is equivalent to what a classroom interpreter does on a dynamic basis (i.e., translating ASL into correct and appropriate English). However, if the student signs and has another person translate the sign language into English, he is not writing in English. Indeed, he is not writing anything. If the student's written grammar interferes with the presentation of the concepts expressed successfully in sign language, then the interpreter could well be inadvertently co-constructing the document with the student. If the point of the

assignment is to submit a written text, that text must be written in English by the student, not translated by another person into English.

Evaluation

For instructors evaluating deaf students' texts, two problems exist. If students receive little or no help, the variety and magnitude of errors found in their submitted work may be so distracting as to detract in significant ways from the intended message. In addition, instructors must establish boundaries for delivering assistance to students and for evaluating their work. That is, instructors must determine how much of the text represents the student's own efforts and how much of the final product is the result of extensive assistance.

Evaluating the written work of deaf students, therefore, requires instructors to first focus on the purpose of the written text rather than the errors contained therein. Writing is intended to be a form of communication. Adhering to some arbitrary designation of perfection such as errorless grammar as a goal in written expression to the exclusion of the message itself is profoundly misdirected. In other words, instructors are well advised to consider giving minimal attention to the surface errors in their deaf students' texts. This is not meant to imply the elimination of instructional support in grammatical areas. However, to evaluate texts fairly, it is important to remember that many of these errors are developmental and will resolve themselves as the students' understanding of English grows. To penalize students for such surface errors is to view those errors as mere carelessness rather than as an incomplete rule system.

To establish appropriate boundaries for determining the amount and kind of assistance deaf students have received, instructors may need to take an extra step. When

teaching writing to deaf students, whether in a group or in a larger class of hearing peers, instructors should consider working one-on-one as a means of becoming familiar with each student's strengths and weaknesses in writing. Seeing unedited writing helps to establish a baseline from which the instructor can more easily determine where the student has self-corrected and where he has received outside editing help.

The whole point of writing is to communicate one's message clearly. Although the message is paramount, if the student lacks sufficient control of English to express that message with reasonable clarity, surface errors notwithstanding, the instructor must evaluate accordingly. Even if writing improvement does take place in a given academic term, if the deaf student does not meet the course requirements, the instructor must award the appropriate grade.

When a student's writing does improve over the course of the term, the term should be counted as a successful experience, even if the student's final grade is not passing. For all students, not only the deaf, honing writing skills is a recursive process that happens over years, not weeks. And for both instructor and student, this process of growth and learning should be valued more highly than the product, an arbitrary grade.

Conclusions

Writing instructors who work with deaf students are challenged to evaluate these students' texts as fairly as possible. It is important to remember that for this population, English, is not natively acquired. Neither, however, do these students' learning patterns completely map onto those of hearing ESL students. For the deaf, learning English is confounded by the knowledge of a signed language with no written form as well as by reduced aural input. Instructors, then, should consider two important guides when

evaluating deaf students' texts: to establish reasonable parameters for outside assistance and to consider meaning over mode. These guides will allow the instructors to equitably assess their students' progress toward clear written expression.

Notes

[1] Throughout this paper, the phrase "deaf and hard-of-hearing" is shortened to "deaf" for ease of reading, but there is no change in meaning.

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