Profiles of deaf and hard of hearing individuals who pursue English as a career

Margaret Knigga

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PROFILES OF DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING INDIVIDUALS WHO PURSUE ENGLISH AS A CAREER

Master's Project

Submitted to the Faculty of the Masters of Science Program in Secondary Education of Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

National Technical Institute of the Deaf ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

By

Margaret (Greta) E. Knigga

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science

Rochester, New York June 3, 1998

Approved:

(Project Advisor)

(Program Director)
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ABSTRACT

Studies documenting Deaf and hard of hearing individuals' successful mastery of English are severely limited. It is hoped that this pilot-like study will set the foundation for future research by examining the profiles of successful Deaf and hard of hearing individuals who pursue English as a career choice. Qualitative methods were used to evoke responses regarding five aspects of Deaf and hard of hearing individuals' lives, including deafness, communication, family, school, and work. The ten participants came from Deaf residential schools, Gallaudet, and N.T.I.D., and represented a range of experiences and backgrounds. This study found that participants had parents who were highly supportive. They also described English as "clicking" for them through structure in language learning. There was also a "specialness" associated with being a Deaf English major and/or teacher. However, this specialness was both negative and positive. Future research is recommended in this area. Positive benefits of such research are better attitudes among professionals in the education of Deaf and hard of hearing students and better understanding of how Deaf individuals learn English.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I squinted as the phone flashed before my eyes. It was 4 am. I wanted so badly to sleep. I fumbled as I answered the phone, hoping not to wake my hearing roommate.

HI GRETA THIS IS MARK I WAS WONDERING IF YOU WOULD PROOFREAD MY PAPER FOR MY 9 AM CLASS IT IS REALLY IMPORTANT! GA

I looked at the clock again. Was it really 4 am? Yes, it was.

HI MARK UMM . . . YEAH . . . YEAH . . . GIMME 20 MINS AND I'LL MEET YOU HERE IN THE FIRST FLOOR LOUNGE GA TO SK

I dragged myself to the bathroom, hoping that the cold water from the faucet would wake me up, enabling me to proofread my friend's paper at this early hour. 1

Mark is profoundly deaf and so am I. Yet, despite having similar types of parenting and going to the same schools while growing up across from each other, English remained a paradox between us. Whenever possible, he avoided any activity that involved substantial amounts of reading and writing, even those within his major courses. On the other hand, I devoured books by vast numbers and gobbled up the English courses at the university with a 3.76 grade point average. Mark was also uncomfortable discussing his English skills with strangers and even with me, his best friend, at times. However, he did ask me for help because he knew he had to.

Despite having several Deaf and hard of hearing friends 2 who struggled with English, I have always been astonished by their attitudes towards all aspects of English, including reading and writing. At times, I felt they were
offensive towards me as they mocked the English language. I somehow never felt approval from my Deaf and hard of hearing friends for wanting to run to a corner to read my favorite book. Likewise, I could not help feeling the sadness, knowing they were missing out on such tremendous joy through the English language.

Having difficulty with English, I found, was not rare among Deaf and hard of hearing individuals. The statistics report that an overwhelming majority of Deaf and hard of hearing individuals graduate from high school with a third to fourth grade reading level (Bochner & Albertini, 1988). As I pursued the study of English among Deaf and hard of hearing individuals, I was constantly reminded of how English is a big "no-no" among many Deaf and hard of hearing individuals, how it brings "ahhhs" from suspecting individuals, how it brings forth images of "bad English" or "Deaf English" from cynical individuals, and how it brings years of turmoil upon Deaf and hard of hearing individuals. Positive attitudes towards English do not appear to exist among Deaf and hard of hearing individuals, or at least they are not the norm.

Statement of the Problem

Previous studies in deafness often sought means to solve the "problem" of Deaf and hard of hearing individuals' English through the study of their reading and writing errors. This research project, however, attempts to break with convention by studying the profiles of Deaf and hard of hearing individuals pursuing English as a career. The evaluation of their experiences, attitudes, and characteristics may provide us with some insight of how we can further promote positive experiences and perhaps provide a "model of success" for other Deaf and hard of hearing individuals with regard to English.

This research project utilizes self-reported responses to an open-ended questionnaire given by the researcher to ten Deaf and hard of hearing
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individuals pursuing English as a career. The goal is to describe the overall profiles of these persons and to use that understanding to develop a "model of success" for other Deaf and hard of hearing individuals. Chapter Two reviews related literature available in this area. Chapter Three discusses the design utilized in this research project. Chapter Four analyzes the self-reported responses while Chapter Five discusses the implications of those responses for Deaf and hard of hearing individuals.

1 Each chapter begins with a personal excerpt from the researcher's experience. These excerpts are indicated by the use of italics. Some of the names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

2 Deaf and hard of hearing individuals identify themselves in two ways. The capital letter "D" indicates that the individual is part of a culture that appreciates American Sign Language and deafness as part of themselves. The word "hard of hearing" refers to a person with any degree of hearing loss who functions "as a hearing person" through speech and lip-reading.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

I peered over Kyle's shoulder. He was frantically typing away on a short story to his best friend. He had often mused that he would rather write than do anything else. I took a quick glance to determine the topic of today's short story. It was hockey, sports as usual.

"Why don't you become a sportswriter?" I asked him once over dinner.

"What for? My English isn't good enough. Look at all my papers. I've got nothing but C's and D's," he said as he threw his papers at me. "Besides, no one is going to hire a Deaf person. They have too many problems with English," he blurted out.

Kyle's struggle here is twofold. First, Kyle believes that his English is not good enough to become a sportswriter. More precisely, he does not believe that Deaf and hard of hearing individuals can have good English. Secondly, he is dealing with poor self-confidence regarding his potential to specialize in writing as a career. This impression, no doubt grounded at least in part by his frustrations in learning written English, is probably exacerbated by the negative statistics and attitudes regarding Deaf and hard of hearing individuals' mastery of English, the lack of appropriate vocational training, and/or the lack of role models in the Deaf community.

"Positive" Research

Studies focusing on Deaf and hard of hearing individuals' successful mastery of English are severely limited. If anything, "positive" research was found within the larger context. For instance, Marschark (1997) provided a brief section in his book, Raising and Educating a Deaf Child, in which he explores
reasons why some Deaf and hard of hearing individuals made good readers. He concludes that the factors involved are still too complex to be easily explained, stating, "Regrettably, there is no single predictor of reading success that works in all cases, and the combinations of factors that positively and negatively influence reading development are not yet fully understood. It may be, for example, that different environments lead to different strengths and weaknesses depending on when, where, and from whom children learn their first and second languages" (p. 47). He did not elaborate on those good readers except to mention that they usually came from Deaf families (Marschark, 1997).

Most studies, if "positive," discuss how Deaf and hard of hearing children of Deaf or hard of hearing parents acquire better English skills, attributing their success to an early exposure to language (Marschark, 1997; Lane et al., 1994). Being deaf themselves, many Deaf and hard of hearing parents realize the need for language. These parents set out to provide their Deaf and hard of hearing children with this foundation in language skills before their children enter school, as opposed to many hearing parents of Deaf and hard of hearing children who do not recognize this need early enough or know how to provide their children with this exposure to language (Moores, 1996). Thus, it is argued the lack of exposure or rather, the delayed exposure to language often leads to Deaf and hard of hearing individuals' deficiencies in English.

"Negative" Research

Despite good intentions, much of the research has been aimed primarily towards solving the "problems" with "Deaf writing" or coming up with statistics regarding the Deaf and hard of hearing individuals' English skills. For instance, at the Rochester Institute of Technology libraries alone, there are at least 50 books aimed at improving the English skills of Deaf and hard of hearing
students through the study of their deficiencies. As for the statistics, most revolve around the fact that most Deaf and hard of hearing individuals have a fourth grade reading level (McAnally et al., 1994) which often advances at only 20% the rate of hearing children (Marschark, 1997) or increases at a rate of less than 0.3 grade equivalents per year (Bochner & Albertini, 1988).

Other research has explored the feelings and attitudes behind the Deaf and hard of hearing individuals' learning English. For example, Meath-Lang (1980) did an extensive study in this area. She found that many Deaf and hard of hearing individuals experience conflicting feelings regarding English, noting that while many of them recognize the need to improve their skills for communication, they are also ambivalent (1980). For instance, one participant in her study could not find the necessity behind learning English, stating:

"I am always not happy to have English but I know English is the most important to everyone. I am glad that I am taking English and it seems very interesting but still not understand why English is so important to everyone . . ." (Meath-Lang, 1980).

However, her participants have also cried out, "Please teach me how to read and English," "I must improve my writings . . ." and "I hope my English will improve and also my reading . . ." (Meath-Lang, 1980). These conflicting attitudes may have resulted from years of frustrating study of the English language (McAnally et al., 1994), and the conflicting emotions of having grown tired of studying it while strongly recognizing the need to master it.

**Influences on Career Choices**

Clearly, research has shown that many Deaf and hard of hearing individuals experience difficulty and frustration with learning to read and write English. Surely, there is some correlation between these experiences and feelings regarding English, and their decisions in choosing a career. Farrugia
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(1992) and Parasnis et al. (1996) found that Deaf and hard of hearing individuals tended to choose "professions and educational opportunities that did not involve extensive spoken communication or reliance on hearing." These choices also frequently reflect varying requirements for English literacy. For instance, Deaf and hard of hearing individuals tended to choose careers such as cook and draftsman over physician (which requires a strong grasp of the English language). Their parents also felt the same way, choosing the same fields for their Deaf and hard of hearing children (DeCaro et al., 1982).

In fact, Deaf and hard of hearing individuals may not choose other majors or careers due to difficulties with English. For instance, Lang (http://www.isc.rit.edu/~aseopwww/) found that English scores were the best predictor determining whether Deaf and hard of hearing individuals choose to enter the science fields. There is a correlation of .70 between language ability and general science achievement alone among general students (Malone & Fleming, 1983). Yet, for Deaf and hard of hearing students, Holt et al. (1992) found that reading comprehension greatly affected performance levels on standardized science and mathematics test scores, implying that Deaf and hard of hearing individuals with low scores were less likely to go into the sciences.

**Poor English = Semiskilled or Unskilled Positions or No Chance for Further Education?**

These studies do not imply that low English skills are a "reflection of the intellectual abilities of Deaf and hard of hearing individuals" (McAnally et al., 1994). However, English is a language which Deaf and hard of hearing individuals need to master in order to "receive appropriate educations and achieve their potentials in the work force and intellectual life of society" (Marschark, 1997). In other words, mastering English enables Deaf and hard of hearing individuals to pursue careers beyond the typical semiskilled or
unskilled jobs. However, most Deaf and hard of hearing individuals do wind up working in semiskilled or unskilled positions (Moores, 1996) perhaps because of their poor English skills.

English literacy is also a prerequisite for higher education. Bienenstock (1987) found that teachers and other professionals working with Deaf and hard of hearing individuals have rewritten parts or all of their students' college applications to help ensure their admission to schools such as Gallaudet or the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, two popular post-secondary programs for Deaf and hard of hearing students. While the enthusiasm of these teachers can be commended, one must also wonder what happens to these students once they are admitted and must demonstrate solid reading and writing without such assistance.

**Lack of (Appropriate) Vocational Training**

The statistics, after all, did state, "With respect to employment, occupational level, wage earnings, and opportunities for advancement, in all groups deaf individuals fared worse than the general U.S. population" (Moores, 1996). This correlates positively with the statistics that the majority of Deaf and hard of hearing individuals perform English at fourth grade reading levels.

Employers and teachers, however, would disagree with this hypothesis. Many have argued that the majority of Deaf and hard of hearing individuals do not have adequate knowledge about different careers due to the lack of vocational training and as a result, are not well-equipped to make careful career decisions (Schroedel, 1992). Moreover, it has been suggested that Deaf and hard of hearing individuals do not go beyond the typical semiskilled or unskilled positions due to lack of appropriate training (Moores, 1996) and especially because of their inability to set career goals, plan ahead, make decisions, solve
problems that occur on the job, and solve problems of career advancement (DiFrancesca, 1978), all of which are unrelated to English skills.

Early vocational training programs began to spring up in the late 1960's and early 1970's to combat the problem of severe underemployment among Deaf and hard of hearing individuals (Twyman & Ouellette, 1978). While vocational training programs for Deaf and hard of hearing individuals prepare students with knowledge about their vocational aptitudes and help them find their interests in career choices (Schroedel, 1990), they are in dire need of improvement (Connolly, 1988; Schroedel, 1990; Twyman & Ouellette, 1978; and Farrugia, 1982). The statistics of twenty years ago are still the same today; the majority of Deaf and hard of hearing individuals are severely under employed and continue to work in semiskilled or unskilled positions (Moores, 1996).

Role Models

Some researchers believe that many of the problems associated with Deaf and hard of hearing individuals' academic and social development may be alleviated by the availability of role models in the Deaf community (Lane et al., 1996). Role models have been found to encourage higher self-esteem (Turner & Scherman, 1996), appropriate outlets of behavior (Daly, 1993), and more appropriate career choices (Anderson, 1995). Deaf and hard of hearing role models may also help Deaf and hard of hearing individuals "have the opportunity to learn a great deal from a Deaf perspective about how to function as a Deaf person in the hearing world" (Lane, et. al., 1996). For instance, having role models in the science and arts is strongly emphasized by Harry Lang, a Deaf scientist, himself, who co-directs AESOP, (Access to English and Science Outreach Program) a project established to promote writing in the sciences for Deaf and hard of hearing students. One of his many activities
involves the locating and identifying those hard-to-find Deaf and hard of hearing role models in the sciences.

Some Deaf writers, however, appear to be more selective in choosing role models. For example, Moore and Panara did not celebrate the achievements of those individuals that contributed to the literary field of English in their book, *Great Deaf Americans* (1986) such as Nancy Kensicki, the first woman who received a doctorate in English and Edith Fitzgerald, a Deaf individual who designed Straight English, a method of teaching English to Deaf and hard of hearing individuals. Perhaps this was done to avoid placing English in high esteem, which could further perpetuate the idea that mastering English is necessary to become successful in the hearing community.

To conclude, we do not have much research documenting Deaf and hard of hearing individuals' successful mastery of English. More often, research has been geared towards solving the "problems" of "Deaf writing" or exploring the feelings of Deaf and hard of individuals towards English. Deaf and hard of hearing individuals' problems with their mastery of English possibly correlate with their career choices and/or avoidance of fields that require strong English skills. Yet, poor career choices can also be the result of weak vocational training programs. Finally, it has been suggested that role models could be very beneficial for Deaf and hard of hearing individuals in choosing careers, whether related to English or not.
CHAPTER III
DESIGN

Goal
The focus on this research project was to explore the profiles of Deaf and hard of hearing individuals pursuing English as a career by evaluating their experiences, attitudes, and characteristics. Through this analysis, it may be possible to develop some understanding of how we may provide a "model of success" for other Deaf and hard of hearing individuals studying English.

Method
A qualitative approach was deemed best for this research project as it would allow for the collection of an array of responses to obtain a broad understanding of some of the things that have negatively or positively impacted those Deaf and hard of hearing individuals who purse English as a career. This approach was also selected because there is little research on Deaf and hard of hearing individuals' successful mastery of English. It was hoped that this study may provide a foundation for future research, whether quantitative or qualitative, on Deaf and hard of hearing individuals' mastery of English.

An open-ended questionnaire was used to solicit detailed description of personal experiences from the participants. Questions covered five aspects of the Deaf and hard of hearing individuals' lives; Deafness, communication, family, school, and work. (See Appendix A for the questions.) The participants were given a great deal of flexibility as there was no set rule for answering the questions. The participants were also encouraged to answer the questions in any way they felt most comfortable. For example, they could choose to answer the questions by hand, typing through a typewriter or computer, electronically through e-mail, or by videotaping themselves and answering the questions through sign language. Although none chose to videotape themselves, the
data from the participants came in different forms. In one instance, the participant answered the questions and included a "writing history" she did for a previous writing seminar. In another instance, the participant simply gave a copy of an article she had written about herself and her family life. Still others responded directly to the questions via electronic mail.

Finding participants for this study was a difficult but not impossible task. Deaf and hard of hearing teachers at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at the Rochester Institute of Technology, Gallaudet University, and Deaf residential schools across the nation were invited to participate in the study. Additionally, students majoring in English at Gallaudet University as well as one Deaf student majoring in secondary education with a concentration English at N.T.I.D. were invited to participate.

The participants were contacted either through regular mail or electronic mail. Each request included a cover letter explaining the nature of the study as well as the various strategies for responding (e-mail, video, etc.). The open-ended questionnaire included a statement informing participants that by answering the questions, they were giving me their consent to use their responses for this study. Participants were also informed that their names would not be used in the study.

A total of ten people out of the fifty seven invited chose to participate in this study. One was a N.T.I.D. student, three were Gallaudet students, two were Gallaudet instructors, two were N.T.I.D. instructors, and two were Deaf teachers at Deaf residential schools.

Data were coded according to the five categories of life experiences covered in the questionnaire. Within each category, the data were then further analyzed. A description of the results of the data analysis is presented in Chapter Four.
"Look! I'm sick of this! One more damn report about Deaf people. They're always telling us what is best for Deaf people!" my best friend, Eileen, exclaimed as she threw her hands up in the air.

Eileen's frustrations with the goal of some research scientists to find solutions to the "world's problems" are understandable. Rather than studying the profiles of Deaf and hard of hearing individuals who have successfully mastered English and evaluating their experiences, characteristics, and attitudes, many research scientists in the past have chosen to categorize Deaf and hard of hearing individuals' "bad English" and/or attempted to find solutions, whether temporary or permanent, to the "ailments" of Deaf and hard of hearing individuals. This project, however, breaks away from the conventional norms of the research community by attempting to develop a "model of success" by evaluating the profiles of Deaf and hard of hearing individuals who have mastered English. In this chapter, participants' responses are described within each of the five categories raised in the questionnaire: Deafness, communication, family, school, and work.

Re: Deafness

Please tell me about your deafness. Were you born deaf or did you become deaf later in life? How did your parents find out? Did you use any hearing devices and what were they? How did you like them? Are you wearing them today?
Of the ten participants, six were born deaf or hard of hearing. The three who were born hearing became deaf prelingually. One had progressive hearing loss which began after she learned English. For parents who were not Deaf or hard of hearing themselves, their child's deafness was a "devastating blow." One parent, hard of hearing himself, did not appear to be shocked that his daughter may be hard of hearing. He simply responded, "Well, if you need a hearing aid, I will go with you. I know about these things," even though he did not wear a hearing aid himself.

Regarding hearing aids, three participants, while acknowledging the disadvantages of hearing aids, found the advantages of listening to environmental sounds far greater and aesthetically pleasing as well. "I wear the aid because I appreciate sounds, beautiful sounds, and because I want to be aware of my sound environment," replied one participant. Yet, three participants said they did not feel the need to wear hearing aids, arguing that they were "fine" without them and/or preferred other means of communication to reliance on hearing aids.¹

Re: Communication

Today, many d/Deaf people feel that sign language or ASL (American Sign Language) was their native language. What do you believe is your native language? When and how did you start learning English? What about ASL? What is your preferred mode of communication (i.e. signs, speech, both)?

When asked about their native language, two participants instinctively responded that ASL was their native language, as they were born into Deaf families. Three other participants also considered ASL as their native
language, even though they learned English first. However, their devotion to English, they warned us, is not to be forgotten.

"ASL is my official language now. But I cannot avoid the importance of English. It is important to know it in order to achieve in the real world. I have a fierce love of the English language, literature, poetry, and the complexity of it all." ²

One participant argued that the meaning of "native language" goes further than having learned it "first" since it was related to "identity, culture and being able to use a language for all purposes and with all the richness humans need for language." Another participant claimed both English and ASL as her native languages while at the same time claiming the latter as her primary language.

Two of the participants explained that structure was the key to their success in learning English, citing Edith Fitzgerald’s method of Straight English and diagramming sentences. They may have studied English for several years; however, they said it did not "click" for them until they were provided with some form of structure in their language learning.

Modes of communications, according to three of the participants, were usually dependent on the situation. One participant used speech while speaking with her family and friends who do not know sign, and sign language while speaking with friends who also know sign language regardless if they were hearing or deaf. Another participant stated that she uses whatever communication mode is suitable for the situation she is in and is able "to do it comfortably on different levels and almost subconsciously, too." Two others, however, said they were more comfortable with only ASL or sign language. Having options with modes of communication, one participant elaborated, allowed her to learn more about other people.
Re: Family

Remembering yourself as a child, can you tell me a little bit about your family? Were they hearing or deaf? Were you able to communicate well with them and why? What were their attitudes towards your deafness?

Family life was dependent upon several factors. Two participants who had Deaf families described their family life in positive terms, sympathizing with those who did not have Deaf families. The participants who had hearing families expressed mixed feelings about their family lives. For instance, two participants who had hearing parents were very positive and two others expressed frustrations with their parents' unwillingness to accept their deafness as part of their identity. According to two participants, mothers were easier to communicate with and sometimes the only person with whom they communicated. However, another participant said that due to her excellent lip-reading and speech skills, she was able to communicate with her entire hearing family without sign language.

Despite the "communicate barrier" between the Deaf and/or hard of hearing child and hearing family members, parents often expected their child to overcome these barriers.

"They have never regarded my deafness as a barrier in all aspects of their lives and even my life. I do recall my parents having higher expectations of my own abilities than I did. For example, my sisters were going to the AWANA club every Friday to recite the passages out of the Bible to earn merits and etc... I told them I didn't want to participate in the club as I thought I couldn't communicate with the AWANA leaders. They responded by saying that I'd figure out a way to resolve the communicate barrier."
I ended up having to write the Biblical passages I had memorized in front of the AWANA leaders in order to earn merits."

How about school? Did your parents (and other family members) feel that it was necessary that you got a "proper education" (in other words, did they make sure that you learned to read and write well and do multiplication tables?)? What were their opinions on education? Did they make sure that you did homework at home or learn to read and write well? How supportive were they in your educational and career plans?

Regarding school, all of the participants had supportive families, even though the participants felt that parents' expectations were oftentimes extreme and/or reflect their parents' ambitions rather than those of the participants.

"My family was determined that I get good education. They felt I could accomplish much in spite of my deafness. They also believed that I would fight long and hard to excel in things I could do. They expected much from me; they had to prove to relatives and friends that I could do many things in spite of my deafness."

For the majority of the participants, mothers took a more active role in their child's education. One participant's mother "even went to the school board and asked for a tutor to come to my house to educate her deaf daughter." Two participants mentioned their fathers' involvement in their education as well. One participant remarked that her father "would send me back the letters I wrote with red marks correcting my grammar."

What about your family today? What do they think of your majoring in English?
Most of the participants' families were supportive of their Deaf and hard of hearing children's wanting to major in English. For example, some families were not surprised, and/or considered it "appropriate" for their Deaf and hard of hearing children. One family hoped that their child would make a difference with other Deaf individuals by majoring in English.

"My family are very proud of me majoring in English -- they do hope I will make a difference with other deaf students in English since a lot of deaf students need to be proud of their English."

One family questioned the practicality of the major. However, this was not due to the participant's deafness, but to the availability of jobs in the English field.

Re: School
Again, remembering yourself as a child, describe the schools you attended. For instance, were they mainstreamed / residential / day schools / oral schools / sign language, etc.? How do you feel about your K-12 education? Was it satisfactory? Why / why not? If you could change anything about your education, what would you have changed?

The participants received education in all forms. Some did not have a consistent form of teaching through their K-12 schooling. Their opinions about school experiences varied, depending on whether they were in the same school throughout K-12 or whether they were in a Deaf program or not. However, according to two participants, the programs for the Deaf was or would have been crucial to their development, emotionally, socially, and educationally. "It would have been very beneficial to me to attend a school where there were significant numbers of deaf students (because I didn't
understand why I was so different) and where I could understand what was going on in class" one participant explained.

What about English? How did you learn English in the schools? Many d/Deaf people have had a difficult time with English. Was it a struggle for you? How did you overcome it? If it was easy for you, do you have explanations why that may be? What are they?

For three participants, learning English was not a struggle. In fact, they could not understand why it came so easily for them and yet was so difficult for others. "I don’t understand why other deaf people have difficulties with English." However, for four of the participants, English was difficult. They credited wonderful familial support and/or a special teacher with helping to make English "click" for them. One participant explained that the struggle with English was more psychological than actual. "I was very conscious of how I wrote because I hated being ridiculed for having 'poor English.'"

What was your general perception of English as you were growing up? For example, how did you become interested in English? Did you always think positively of English? Did you think negatively of English until something happened? Did an experience (both positive and negative) provoke you to work harder with English? Please describe some of the things happened that either made you enjoy or despise English!

Most of the participants did not think much of English until they reached high school or college. Their experiences with English ranged from positive to negative. Two participants told of their fascination with words and songs. "I
remember singing on top of my lungs, 'To make plural, drop the Y and add I E S.' It was loads of fun." Those with positive experiences also understood their limitations with English, which only made them want to work harder.

"English is not a struggle for me, to be honest because I read a great deal. However, I do notice some minor weaknesses. One of them is vocabulary. The other one is using articles (determiners). My hearing friends told me that I had to hear well to know when to use them... I do not hesitate to ask my friends to help me with vocabulary or articles whenever I need it."

The participants commented on negative experiences when describing the "competition" between them and a higher-achieving sibling and/or other well-versed Deaf and hard of hearing people. They also said they were discouraged when others suggested that Deaf and hard of hearing people could not teach or master English well.

"Perception of English - I knew I deep inside thought negatively of the language, but my friends kept asking me for help with their learning to read and write. I realized then that I was capable of teaching English, but my dream was crushed once I realized it was impossible for the Deaf to teach reading and writing, let alone any other subjects. I was around 11 or 12."

English was a tool for "intimidation" according to another participant, a way to get "power." "I could have hated English and refused to have anything to do with English, but I held on to English as I knew it is a way of life, a way of success. I want that kind of power."

Many people stress the importance of "role models." Do you feel that you had a role model while you were growing up? Who was that person(s) and how did he/she/they influence you?
For the participants, role models were few and far in between. Mothers were role models for three of the participants. Two participants also listed Deaf teachers as their role models while two others listed successful women as their role models, "Strong women attracted me . . . I think because of their 'fight' against discrimination at that time, but I didn't really recognize it then."

Regarding English, however, none of them really had role models unless authors were counted.

When you went to college, how and when did you know that you wanted to major in English? (Did you have another major before English? What was it and how did you end up being in English? Did you major in English because you realized that you had good language skills and how did you find out?) Who and/or what helped you to make the decision?

The participants majored in English for a variety of reasons, none the same. Several participants enjoyed English but needed the support of a brother to pursue English. For another, a professor convinced her that she had good language skills. Another wished to avoid difficult courses associated with lectures in a hearing college. Sampling psychology courses convinced another participant to change her major. Changes in the curriculum also forced changes in course requirements. For two participants, knowing that the field was challenging for Deaf and hard of hearing individual was a motivating factor.

"Graduated with an AAS degree in Medical Records Technology at N.T.I.D. and worked for a few months in PGH, Pa. after graduation."
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Deaf teachers and self-empowerment helped me make that decision to become a teacher in the field of English."

"I wanted to major in English at college but my favorite teacher told me that my vocabulary would be a big obstacle. At that time, they did not allow the students to major in English unless they had some hearing. I must admit I agree with it. I think that only a handful of profoundly deaf people can major in it. I have accepted the fact that I may have to work hard on written English all the time."

Lastly, one participant wished to be different from other Deaf people. "I used to want to become a civil engineer, but I realized that there were many other Deaf students who did math better (grin)." In short, participants' reasons to major in English appeared to have nothing in common other than the fact they all enjoyed English.

How did people react when you told them you were majoring in English? What did they say? How did they look? What was your response (both immediate and delayed?)? Please describe both negative and positive experiences.

Those who knew the participants well were not surprised to learn of their plans to major in English. Yet, reactions from people other than Deaf and/or hearing family and friends were often more negative.

"If I meet a deaf stranger at a party, and tell them that I am an English major, they always give me that look. Ugh! I hate English, always came hard for me."
"I've heard worse stories...if I meet people who 'think' they excel in English, then I'd be treated a bit differently from the way they'd treat others. They'd even sign in order, or become more wordy. For those, who claimed that they 'stink' in English, have a tendency of feeling in intimidated by me--but for those who don't care tend to ask for help (such as proofreading, tutoring, etc)."

One participant, however, wrote of mixed reactions from her Deaf friends, arguing that they were "pleasantly surprised," seeing her as facilitator of their learning English and "disappointed," seeing her as "an oppressor who does not recognize ASL as a legitimate language." The impracticality of majoring in English was also mentioned by another participant.

Re: Work

Only three participants answered the questions relating to work. Thus, caution should be made when evaluating these data.

What were your experiences like as you looked for a job out of college? Was it difficult to find a job? Why/why not? If you've looked for jobs at other places besides where you are now, did you ever face attitudes from other employers insisting that "deaf people cannot do English well?" If yes, how did you respond to that?

Two participants described how easily they got jobs at one point or another in their careers. However, they also wrote of people who were not so willing to hire them or who wanted proof of their competency in English. "The superintendent, actually a pleasant person and a CODA, had nothing against me, but he absolutely did not want any deaf teacher on his staff," explained one
participant. Another stated, "The only problem I ever had was that one person who interviewed me from the English Department gave me a 'grammar test.' During our one-on-one interview. This was incredibly inappropriate and I doubt the person would have done it with a hearing candidate (he was hearing)."

**Please tell me about your experiences of being in the English field. How did/do other people react to you? For instance, do you feel that your hearing colleagues working in English see you as their peer in terms of your abilities in English? Why/why not? Is the label of being an "English teacher" enough? Do you still have to prove yourself? If you had to win their approval, how did/do you respond to situations like this?**

Judging from the responses, being an English teacher often put the participants in "no-win" situations. Because English did not sit well with Deaf people, their reactions to participants were often negative.

"When I finally became an English teacher, it was interesting to note a rapid decline of my 'popularity' as a teacher. Its bewilderingly funny that it happened, but I sort of expected that stereotype because I knew students' dislike for English. I also knew that my students did not hate me for who I am; they simply hated English or anything associated with English. True, its tragic that English is the most despicable subject. I can understand why English is not a pleasant subject; it is a thinking subject, and many students finding thinking is a hard work. When I was the English teacher, I tried to make English into a likable and friendly-user subject."
Two participants argued that they had to work hard to "dispel misconceptions" by taking up several writing projects and programs. However, being a Deaf English teacher also carried some weight.

"At present, being a deaf English teacher carries a bit of status and I feel sometimes they try to win my approval (smile). They know I am outspoken, so often are careful...ha.. In the general deaf education field, people almost always respond with kind of a surprise when I say I teach English. There is a bit more feeling of "wow, you teach English..." as opposed to if I said history or math."

"There is STILL an attitude among hearing and deaf people that a deaf person who teaches English is special, unique and somehow more intelligent than others. This is really the most annoying part of my job, dealing with this attitude. I have deaf friends who teach ASL who do not deal with this at all...the 'wow' attitude that makes me uncomfortable deal with the fact that I do believe on an unconscious level most of these people hold English still in higher esteem."

What about the classroom and your students? When did you realize that you could teach English as well or even better than the other (hearing) teachers? What do you feel are the key characteristics of an effective English teacher for the deaf (note: the teacher may either be hearing or deaf)? Do you think deaf students benefit more from deaf teachers than hearing teachers?
Two participants discussed the qualities of being an English teacher. One explained the need for English teachers with an "added understanding" of Deaf and hard of hearing students.

"I do believe that Deaf teachers and hearing teachers have different strengths. I believe it is very positive to sometimes have Deaf teachers and sometimes have hearing teachers. Hearing teachers bring a true native ability to the task of teaching English. I feel that Deaf teachers often bring interpretive and experience from a Deaf perspective. Yesterday in class we were discussing the meaning of the word 'syllable' that popped up in our literature selection. I did explain what it means in terms of English words...but I also explained how Deaf people have a similar type thing happening when we fingerspell words. It is not all one smooth movement...we have 'natural' pauses when producing the word. The problem hearing teachers have and some deaf teachers too, I think, is that it easy to criticize English skills and make Deaf students feel stupid. It is important to recognize that English does not indicate intelligence...and though people understand this, they often don't behave that way. I assist phd level deaf students and other community members with written English because they say if they show a hearing person they will be embarrassed and they feel more comfortable with me...I think that is a complex social relationship...and hearing people need to be very careful...Key skills: I think are the same as other teachers...but this added understanding."

The other provided an extensive list of effective teaching qualities, emphasizing mastery and respect of ASL. One participant explained that Deaf
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and hard of hearing students still believe that Deaf and hard of hearing teachers cannot teach English.

"They see I can sign well...but often there is one student each quarter who thinks I am hearing. When I ask why and show my hurt (smile), they often say simply because they have never had a deaf English teacher or didn't think that a deaf person could teach English."

And lastly, if a deaf person came up to you and said, "I want to major in English." What would you say to that person and why?

All of the responses to this question were positive, congratulating the students while providing words of support. However, two participants would want to "ask questions" relating to the person's desire to teach English or why they were interested in teaching English.

"I'd ask more questions in order to know this person more. I need to know WHY s/he wants to major in English, then I'll see how this major can help him/her with his future endeavors."
DISCUSSION

This study uses background information, experiences, and attitudes to describe the profiles of Deaf and hard of hearing individuals who pursue English as a career. There are three types of data involved in this study including (1) background information regarding onset of deafness, characteristics of families, types of schools attended, etc., (2) experiences and attitudes that facilitate mastery of English as well as career choices in English and (3) experiences and attitudes that inhibit mastery of English as well as career choices in English. Additionally, one participant raised an excellent suggestion regarding the education of students who Deaf and hard of hearing. Each of these points is described below.

Background Information

The participants' backgrounds are very diverse, in many ways reflecting the characteristics of the larger Deaf community. Nine out of the ten participants became deaf prelingually and only two were born to Deaf parents. This is close to the statistic that 90% of all Deaf and hard of hearing children have hearing parents. Eight of the participants learned English first and later claimed ASL as their "native language" and all preferred to communicate through sign language, although two were able to use speech with their family members. All the participants attended different schools with some moving from one program to another throughout their education. School experiences included Deaf residential, hearing, day classes, and programs for the hearing impaired. On the whole, participants appeared to be a fairly representative group of Deaf community members.
Experiences and Attitudes that Facilitate Mastery of English as well as Career Choices in English

Several things were found to facilitate the mastery of English as well as career choices in English. They include the "click" with English when taught through a structured approach, familial support, and encouragement when making decisions in choosing a major. Each is discussed below.

As students of English, the participants have many ideas about their own language learning. Because of this, they may be more able to describe the learning processes behind their learning a language. Although the participants were not able to explain why English was or was not a struggle for them, the participants could explain what made English "click" for them. For two of the participants, structure in language learning was the key to their successes in learning English. In other words, being guided with Edith Fitzgerald's Straight English or the old method of diagramming sentences enabled them to "click" with English rather than being expected to pick up a language along the way which many hearing children do.

In fact, many Deaf and hard of hearing students were entering school without a language. Despite spending a greater proportion of their education studying reading and writing, this did not guarantee that the information provided will be presented in a form that guarantees the Deaf and hard of hearing students' "clicking" with English. Having teachers that change yearly and/or changing schools to find one that satisfied their educational needs may only have contributed to the problem.

Although "structure" in language learning was important, familial support was far more important. All of the participants described how supportive their parents were toward their education. Their child's deafness may have been a "devastating blow" for them, but it did not stop these parents from having high expectations for their Deaf or hard of hearing child. Although the mothers
tended to be more vocal in their support, both of the participants' parents expected their children to overcome the communication barrier, to read and write well, to receive college degrees, and so forth. Perhaps, finding out that their Deaf or hard of hearing child wished to major in English came as no surprise merely because they expected them to do well.

None of the participants, however, majored in English simply because their parents' expected them to excel in the language. Like any other college student, they sampled courses, listened to feedback from others, and looked at their own interests before deciding to pursue English as a college major. Moreover, the decision was not reached without careful consideration because the participants had mixed feelings about English. They may be able to recite old grammatical songs; however, they were not oblivious to their own grammatical mistakes nor the problems other Deaf and hard of hearing individuals had learning English. Perhaps some of them had adopted the attitude that "experts" were human beings, that is, were allowed to make mistakes and to persist in the field of English. For three of the participants, however, knowing that English commanded respect and power was enough to keep them striving.

These findings suggest a model for encouraging Deaf persons to excel and pursue careers in English. We surround that person with lots of familial support, high expectations for achievement, and a structured approach to language. Presto! We have our "model of success." Yet, their experiences are not complete, as they also face experiences and attitudes that inhibited to some point their mastery of English as well as career choices in English.
Experiences and Attitudes that Inhibit Mastery of English as well as Career Choices in English

Several things were found to inhibit the mastery of English as well as career choices in English. They included the negative reactions of people who did not believe that Deaf and hard of people should teach English, negative attitudes and barriers in the workforce, defensive feelings towards their positions as English teachers, the air of "specialness/uniqueness" with a twist, and the lack of Deaf role models. Each is discussed below.

When asked how people responded to their wanting to major in English, family and friends were rather comfortable. However, they received negative feedback from others. "They always give me that look." "I'd be treated differently from the way they'd treat others." One participant described the "win-lose" situation with her Deaf friends. They applauded her for wanting to improve the Deaf and hard of hearing students' English but at the same time saw her as an "oppressor who does not recognize ASL as a legitimate language."

The workforce, according to three participants, was also not free from negative attitudes and barriers. The participants were required to prove their competency in English to people in the Deaf education profession and even to their Deaf and hard of hearing students. One participant went "all out" promoting literacy programs to prove her abilities in the English field and another participant had to take a grammar test before being hired to her present job. Deaf and hard of hearing students were not so willing to believe that their English teachers were deaf AND proficient in sign language.

A prospective English teacher stated, "I have a feeling that I will always be defending my position a lot." They feel they have to defend themselves to hearing people, including those in the Deaf education profession who do not believe that Deaf persons are capable of teaching English. They must also
defend themselves to Deaf and hard of hearing individuals who do not believe that Deaf and hard of hearing individuals can learn and teach English.

At the same time, they protest the attitude that "you are better than me simply because you are an English teacher." They have found that both hearing and Deaf people regard them in high esteem simply because they teach English. This has made them uncomfortable because it indicated to them that Deaf and hard of hearing individuals who successfully master English are "more intelligent," when they did not feel this way. They object strongly to the idea that English teachers are more intelligent than other Deaf and hard of hearing individuals. They feel that they are like other Deaf people with one difference in mind; they enjoy English. One participant remarked that she had as much respect for the Deaf and hard of hearing teachers who taught ASL.

Some of the participants described being discouraged by situations where they overheard someone say, "Deaf people cannot learn or teach English." Some of the participants required an extra push from family, teachers, and friends to bring them back on track with their career choices in the field of English. Without these supporters, there is no telling where they would have been today. Role models would have benefited them and other Deaf and hard of hearing individuals a great deal since they would be able rely on the support of people other than their families and friends. Unfortunately, participants reported no Deaf or hard of hearing role models in English. With them, they might have had higher self-esteem, been more focused with their career choices, and been more confident in their abilities as Deaf English teachers.
**Suggestion for English Education for Students Who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing**

Perhaps, education for Deaf and hard of hearing students needs to come full circle and follow the recommendations of one participant. She stated that both Deaf and hearing English teachers, in general, needed "an added understanding" for Deaf and hard of hearing students learning English. She willingly acknowledged that both Deaf and hearing teachers contribute much to the classroom, with each bringing their own strengths and weaknesses. But putting the two together, Deaf and hard of hearing students may benefit even more. Perhaps they may begin to believe that Deaf and hard of hearing individuals can learn AND teach English. On the other hand, perhaps hearing people may learn to recognize and respect Deaf and hard of hearing individuals' abilities to teach English proficiently. Further implications are discussed in chapter five.

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1 Because the participants were given a great deal of flexibility in answering the questions, they did not answer all of the questions directly. Thus, the researcher was not always able to account for all of the participants for all of the questions discussed here.

2 These excerpts were taken exactly from the participants wording. However, because the participants mostly used e-mail to answer the questions, their approach to this study may have been more casual and laid back. For example, one participants typed "phd" for "Ph.D." as it was time-consuming for her. On the whole, people in general tend to use a more relaxed style of writing when using e-mail.
CHAPTER V
IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

"I told my boss about the problems we were having with the network at work. I gave him some ideas of how we could fix them. He just blew up and wouldn't listen to me. But when Randy talked to him, using all of my ideas, he immediately calmed down and told us to go ahead with the resolutions I proposed and Randy got all the credit." Hannah fumed as she got home from work.

"Why don't they think that Deaf people are capable of doing the work?" Hannah was signing furiously by now.

Implications

In the previous chapter, one participant discussed the need for an "added understanding" from both Deaf and hearing teachers when teaching Deaf and hard of hearing students. She explained that Deaf teachers bring their understanding of Deaf culture into the classroom and how to tie English with what they do or do not know due to their inability to hear. For instance, Deaf and hard of hearing students may have difficulty understanding the meaning of "syllable" due to their inability to hear. However, they may be able to understand better by relating "syllables" to sign language. On the other hand, hearing teachers, although they may not fully understand ASL, bring their native-like qualities of the English language to the classroom. The inclusion of both Deaf and hearing teachers may improve the teaching of English in the classroom. Perhaps, greater efforts could be made to coordinate team-teaching methods. This is, however, only one implication of several suggested by this study of the education of Deaf and hard of hearing students.
The belief that Deaf and hard of hearing individuals who pursue English as a career are more intelligent is somewhat prevalent today. Teachers and other professionals for Deaf and hard of hearing individuals need to encourage the mentality that Deaf and hard of hearing students are intelligent regardless of their skills in English. Yet, they also need to encourage the philosophy that Deaf and hard of hearing individuals can master English and be "loyal" to the cultural values of the Deaf community.

This process may be facilitated through the use of Deaf and hard of hearing role models in English, which would further the ideas that Deaf people “can do anything but hear” (I. King Jordan) and that it is not "crime" for Deaf and hard of hearing individuals to master English. Perhaps then people will not continue to put Deaf and hard of hearing individuals who pursue English as a career on a pedestal.

Lastly, this study showed the importance of having familial support, especially the encouragement of high expectations and promotion of education as vital to their successes. Teachers of Deaf and hard of hearing students need to encourage families of Deaf and hard of hearing individuals to be highly supportive of their children regardless of their initial reactions to their child's deafness. Perhaps this type of parenting works a lot like the self-fulfilling prophecy, since familial support was one of the major factors contributing to all of the participants’ successes in mastering English.

**Future Research**

This pilot-like study suggests further avenues for future "positive" research which can lead to better understanding of how Deaf and hard of hearing individuals learn English.

Many topics proposed in this study are worth considering for future research. For instance, several participants referred to the "click" they
experienced when learning English. They argued that this happens more successfully in English programs that provided structure in language learning. Research can evaluate the "click" the participants described and how we, as teachers, can encourage this in a structured form when using the whole language approach or in bilingual programs which are so popular among programs for the Deaf and hard of hearing.

Researchers may also evaluate the attitudes of others towards Deaf and hard of hearing individuals who have successfully mastered English. Despite wanting to believe that "Deaf people can do anything but hear," many people, both Deaf or hearing and professionals or blue collar workers, still do not believe that Deaf and hard of hearing individuals can learn and master English well and when they do, they resent them. Researchers can also study the effects of role models and how we can effectively use them in changing negative attitudes. This also applies to familial support and how family members can encourage positive attitudes among Deaf and hard of hearing individuals.

Lastly, this study may be duplicated to compare and evaluate findings across cultures, especially with other bilingual individuals and/or families. This type of study may also provide further evidence that ASL is a genuine language that has the same characteristics of other languages.

As we can see, this pilot-like study shows the need for further research, especially research that encourages a more positive outlook towards Deaf and hard of hearing individuals and their distinctions rather than focusing on "what's the problem and how can we fix it?" Further research on successful Deaf and hard of hearing individuals in other areas, such as math, science, business or art, will add to the trend of positive study and inquiry.
REFERENCES


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Web site: http://www.isc.rit.edu/~aseopwww/
APPENDIX A

QUESTIONS

Re: DEAFNESS
Please tell me about your deafness. Were you born deaf or did you become deaf at a later life? How did your parents find out? Did you use any hearing devices and what were they? How did you like them? Are you wearing them today?

Re: COMMUNICATION
Today, many d/Deaf people feel that sign language or ASL was their native language. What do you believe is your native language? When and how did you start learning English? What about ASL? What is your preferred mode of communication (i.e. signs, speech, both)?

Re: FAMILY
Remembering yourself as a child, can you tell me a little bit about your family? Were they hearing or deaf? Were you able to communicate well with them and why? What are their attitudes towards your deafness?

How about school? Did your parents (and other family members) feel that it was necessary that you got a "proper education" (in other words, did they make sure that you learned to read and write well and do multiplication tables?)? What were their opinions on education? Did they make sure that you did homework at home or learn to read and write well? How supportive were they in your educational and career plans?

What about your family today? What do they think of your majoring in English?

Re: SCHOOL
Again, remembering yourself as a child, describe the schools you attended. For instance, were they mainstreamed / residential / day schools / oral schools / sign language, etc.? How do you feel about your K-12 education? Was it satisfactory? Why/why not? If you could change anything about your education, what would you have changed?

What about English? How did you learn English in the schools? Many d/Deaf people have had a difficult time with English. Was it a struggle for you? How did you overcome it? If it was easy for you, do you have explanations why that may be? What are they?

What was your general perception of English as you were growing up? For example, How did you become interested in English? Did you always think positively of English? Did you think negatively of English until something happened? Did an experience (both positive and negative) provoke you to work harder with English? Please describe some of the things happened that either made you enjoy or despise English!

Many people stress the importance of "role models." Do you feel that you had a role model while you were growing up? Who was that person(s) and how did he/she/they influence you?
When you went to college, how and when did you know that you wanted to major in English? (Did you have another major before English? What was it and how did you end up being in English? Did you major in English because you realized that you had good language skills and how did you find out?) Who and/or what helped you to make the decision?

How did people react when you told them you were majoring in English? What did they say? How did they look? What was your response (both immediate and delayed?)? Please describe both negative and positive experiences.

Re: WORK
(MOST OF THESE QUESTIONS ARE GEARED PRIMARILY TOWARDS ENGLISH TEACHERS. IF YOU ARE NOT TEACHING ENGLISH, PLEASE ATTEMPT TO ANSWER THE QUESTIONS REGARDLESS. FOR INSTANCE, "WHEN DID YOU REALIZE THAT YOU COULD TEACH ENGLISH AS WELL OR EVEN BETTER THAN THE HEARING TEACHERS?" COULD BE MODIFIED TO, "WHEN DID YOU REALIZE THAT YOU COULD DO YOUR JOB AS WELL OR EVEN BETTER THAN THE HEARING PEOPLE?")

What were your experiences like as you looked for a job out of college? Was it difficult to find a job? Why/why not? If you've looked for jobs at other places besides where you are now, did you ever face attitudes from employers insisting that "deaf people cannot do English well?" If yes, how did you respond to that?

Please tell me about your experiences of being in the English field. How did/do other people react to you? For instance, do you feel that your hearing collegiate working in English see you as their peer in terms of your abilities in English? Why/why not? Is the label of being an “English teacher” enough? Do you still have to prove yourself? If you had to win their approval, how did/do you respond to situations like this?

What about the classroom and your students? When did you realize that you could teach English as well or even better than the other (hearing) teachers? What do you feel are the key characteristics of an effective English teacher for the deaf (note: the teacher may either be hearing or deaf)? How do you think deaf students benefit more from deaf teachers than hearing teachers?

And lastly, if a deaf student came up to you and said, “I want to major in English.” What would you say to that person and why?