The Academic english literacy acquisition experiences of deaf college students

Kathryn Schmitz

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This doctorate would not have been possible if I did not teach at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, whose students inspired me to explore their academic English literacy learning experiences. The opportunity to undertake this study as a natural outgrowth of my work as an English teacher of deaf students has been life-changing and very rewarding. I thank my informants, first of all.

Dr. James Collins, my advisor and dissertation chair, showed great interest and confidence in my work throughout my time at the University at Buffalo, and I thank him for his guidance and for encouraging me to include my own voice in this dissertation. I also thank Dr. Lois Weis for pushing me to write the best dissertation I could and Dr. Mary McVee for her support and open mind in considering the issues I raised in this research.

I also thank many people at NTID for all their support during the eight long years that I have spent on my doctoral studies, and I want to start with my English Department colleagues who have helped me enormously and cheered me on: Susan Keenan, who has been one of my readers and a participant in one of my research studies; John-Allen Payne, who has read several of my papers; Gene Lylak and John Panara, who also participated in one of my research studies; Leslie Bowers, who introduced me to the notion of CALP; Liz O’Brien, NTID professor emeritus, CODA, and fellow UB GSE alumna who has been one of my closest allies since I began working at NTID in 1989; and Stephen Aldersley, my chairperson, who supported me in every way that I asked him to and who must be exhausted from pushing me to finish this dissertation. Innumerable other colleagues at NTID were instrumental in helping me keep the faith, especially near the end of this
dissertation-writing process: Ellie Rosenfield (who read parts of this dissertation), Gerry Buckley, Alan Hurwitz, Chris Licata, and Linda Siple are just a few of my favorite fans.

Finally, I thank my family for being so supportive and thinking this whole enterprise was a good idea for different reasons: Dad wanted me to do the doctorate to advance in the academy, Mom wanted me to do it because it was important to me and validated how she raised me, and my brother Michael and my sister Betsy rooted for their older sister to get this culturally valued terminal degree, probably to encourage their own children to set big goals for themselves. If their deaf aunt can do it, surely they can, too (and they're hearing). Lastly, Heather Smith, my partner, has been very patient and encouraging all this time, and I thank her for living through this with me.
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation was to describe deaf college students’ perceptions of their experiences learning academic English literacy. The study examined the narrated academic English literacy acquisition experiences and practices of 11 deaf and hard-of-hearing students at a hearing university with a large deaf student population. Through paradigmatic analysis of narrative data, the study located common themes that revealed their perceptions of academic English literacy acquisition.

The study was conducted with deaf students attending a college for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, which is one of eight colleges at a major northeastern university. Methods employed in the study were phenomenological interviewing and recursive analysis. The primary data sources were participant interviews and a focus group. Analysis was conducted through recursive interaction with the data, in which repeated reviews served to first elicit themes and meanings and then confirm interpretation of same. First, the study identified pre-college literacy experiences and beliefs about literacy learning, activities that took place in college English courses, and obstacles perceived to limit participants’ progress through the academic English system. Second, the study examined assistive and collaborative learning experiences discussed by participants as well as the roles of their deaf peers in these experiences. Third, the study examined participants’ perceptions of instructors, expectations, and teaching methods.

The study resulted in the following findings: 1) participants struggled to find the right balance between working with assistance and working independently; 2) participants’ experiences resulted in a preference for highly competent communicators for
instructors, and these tended to be deaf instructors; 3) participants observed a difference in the kind of assistance they received within their own college and the larger university; 4) they expressed a preference for learning environments that they perceived to be more visually accessible to them, such as group discussions with peers who also signed; and 5) they encountered conflicts that restricted their learning, which ranged from communication to unclear or rigid expectations to internal contradictions between challenge and remediation.

The dissertation concluded by showing how understanding deaf college students’ perceptions of academic English literacy acquisition may inform and improve teaching practices with this population, especially with regard to promoting proficiency with the dominant literacies of school and work.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

“Being literate means you can bring your knowledge and your experience to bear on what passes before you.... Proper literacy should extend a man's control over his life and environment and allow him to continue to deal rationally and in words with his life and decisions. Improperly it reduces and destroys his control (O'Neil, 1970, pp. 262-263).”

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM
True literacy for people, deaf and hearing, involves access to information and knowledge so that they can understand how to participate in the world around them and then acquire experiences that can lead them toward considering how to change the world and create a more suitable life experience as full participants, not second-class citizens. This study takes a closer look at how one group of deaf and hard-of-hearing\(^1\) students participated in a particular arena of literacy, academic English, and the meaning they made of their experiences.

Literacy is, according to Gee (1991), the ability to gain fluency in a language and to recognize the contexts and values that give a language power. Literacy therefore is political, social, and cultural. It confers the opportunity to engage in the discourses inherent in contexts involving people, circumstances, and power or capital. It also reflects the discursive relationship between knowing one's world and expressing oneself in that world through reading and writing and changing the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). In theory, being literate confers literate citizenship (Kliwer, Biklen, & Kasa-Hendrickson, 2006).

\(^1\) In this dissertation, the phrase "deaf and hard-of-hearing" will be shortened to "deaf" for ease of reading, but no change in meaning.
Literacy is a predictor of success in school and life in the United States. The more highly literate one is, the more successful one is likely to be in endeavors at home, in school, and at work (Kaestle, Damon-Moore, Stedman, & Tinsley, 1993). However, in the United States, to be literate is commonly perceived to be skilled specifically in reading and writing in English. “In spite of the fact that literacy is not a synonym for the English language, our (hearing) American culture tends to view it as such, ignoring other critical kinds of literacy—in the case of the deaf, for example, the gestural American sign language.... Thus the Deaf have been advised—indeed, at times, forced—to become at least marginally skilled in what 'hearies' have an easier time measuring, the written English language (Bednar, 1989, p. 53).”

By this measure, deaf people as a group demonstrate lower literacy than their hearing peers. When judged by literacy standards used in schools in the United States for all students, deaf and hearing, deaf high school seniors demonstrated a median reading comprehension equivalent to a 4th grade level for hearing students (Holt, Traxler, & Allen, 1997). Deaf students not only do not read or write English as well as their hearing peers, they also are more powerless in the school context involving hearing people.

Many deaf people who have poor English skills not only cannot read or write well, they often cannot successfully engage in the discourses required for access to opportunities, power, and other sources of capital in society because their skills are deemed inadequate by members of the hegemonic hearing community (Apple, 2004). The implications of going through life in a majority world as a disadvantaged member with, at best, a 5th grade reading level are not positive. Career options are limited in today’s world for those without college degrees, much less those with poor reading and writing skills.
The available options do not include those that pay well, which means that the associated standard of living does not permit for many luxuries or a level of comfort that encourages people to expend their energies in continuing to learn for learning’s sake. Less money typically means fewer opportunities to try and learn new things that might expand one’s awareness and horizons. And the less one participates in the world in ways that change horizons, the more one is trapped within established boundaries not of one’s own making.

**Research Questions**

Even after such inauspicious beginnings, many deaf people do attend college. Above and beyond the “simple” task of learning to read and write, deaf people who eventually attend college face the challenge of using English in academically acceptable ways, conforming to the discourse practices of the college community, if they wish to participate meaningfully as literate citizens in the structures of power and solidarity in college and the larger society. Typically, their use of English does not conform to standard English nor to academic English, which led me to focus my inquiry on the experiences they encounter as they negotiate literacy learning in the college setting and on the meaning they make of those experiences. To guide the research, I generated the following research questions:

What are the narrated college academic English literacy acquisition experiences and practices of a group of deaf and hard-of-hearing students at a hearing university with a large deaf student population? How does this inform us about their perceptions of academic English literacy acquisition?

Before we can explore these questions, we need to first understand some of the factors that have created the model of deaf people as less-literate citizens. Major reasons for this situation include difficulties acquiring the dominant language, educational practices
and policies, and subjugation to the beliefs and recommendations of dominant members of society.

DIFFICULTY ACQUIRING ENGLISH

English is an auditory language, and people who cannot hear have great difficulty acquiring it. People who can hear have had the opportunity to listen to English all their lives, including during the time they were in their mothers’ wombs. They have been able to naturally acquire the morphology and syntax, including orthography, phonetics, phonology, pragmatics, and semantics, of English over time.

For prelingually deaf people, this opportunity for complete exposure to the language is missing in their acquisition of English. “Although the term prelingually deaf is subject to various definitions and interpretations, we use it in reference to person who have sensorineural hearing impairments of 90 dB or greater that occurred prior to the age of 2 years. These individuals are likely to use vision as their major (or only) channel for receiving communication, and thus they are likely to be oriented visually rather than aurally to language acquisition (McAnally, Rose, & Quigley, 1994, p. v).” Clearly, under these circumstances, full access to English is severely limited. Lest anyone try to argue that English can be considered a visual language because it is written and can be read on the lips while spoken, this is not true. Speechreading and writing are visual codes for spoken languages, not visual languages in and of themselves.

In addition, social interaction is an essential aspect of learning any language (Marschark, Lang, & Albertini, 2002; McAnally et al., 1994). Frequently deaf people are not diagnosed early in life, cutting them off from meaningful social language contact at an early enough age to begin acquiring a native language. According to Meadow, the loss of sound is
not the basic deprivation of deafness, but rather the loss of language (1980). “The acquisition of language requires fluent communicative interaction between children and mature language users, as well as intact sensory mechanisms to transmit linguistic information to the brain (McAnally et al., 1994, p. 31).” Compounding this problem is the fact that 95% of all deaf children are born to hearing parents, nearly all of whom expect their child to speak English and nearly none of whom know any kind of visual language, such as American Sign Language. (G. Mitchell, 1982; R. E. Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004)

Furthermore, McAnally, et al, point out that even with the use of amplification (hearing aids or cochlear implants), manual communication (which rarely is American Sign Language), and written language, deaf children's linguistic intake remains “impoverished and incomplete (McAnally et al., 1994, p. 31).” No wonder then that so many deaf people exhibit “impoverished and incomplete” competence in reading and writing English.

Research shows that most individuals with severe or profound hearing losses (i.e., greater than 70 dB) do not acquire functional speech. Unlike their ability to acquire spoken language, deaf people’s ability to acquire sign language, which relies on the visual rather than the auditory modality, is not impaired. “The only deaf children, however, who actually acquire language at a normal rate are those born to deaf families who use a natural sign language, such as American Sign Language (ASL). Because 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents, they are unable to exploit their available language-learning capabilities due to this sensory mismatch (Musselman, 2000).”

Consequently, for deaf people as well other non-native users, English is not their first language. Furthermore, although they may receive ambient exposure to English, deaf children are rarely considered native users of English given the fact that nearly all have
hearing parents (G. Mitchell, 1982; R. E. Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004). However, their hearing loss typically impedes any native acquisition, even rudimentarily, of their parents’ language, and these children rely instead on gesture, idiosyncratic home signs, and isolated words to convey basic needs (Luetke-Stahlman, 1982). The English deaf children eventually use cannot be termed a native language, in the sense that it is neither acquired from primary caregivers, nor acquired in the manner of hearing counterparts (Luetke-Stahlman, 1982). Moreover, given that deaf children’s parents typically are not skilled users of American Sign Language (ASL) or any form of signed English, ASL cannot be considered to be natively used in deaf children’s language development.

According to Lindfors (1980), a child acquires the language of his community. However, because most young deaf children often do not have access to either the hearing or the deaf community, it is difficult to identify any language as a first language. Bochner and Albertini (1988) use the term “primary” rather than first language to describe the English this population acquires, although they view it as a “variegated form” (p. 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.

While many deaf students eventually use American Sign Language (ASL) or a variant, there are significant differences between ASL and many spoken languages. The most conspicuous difference is that ASL has no written form. Writing, then, for deaf
students who rely on sign language becomes a task of making sense of a print form which has no usable aural counterpart and for which there is no model in their manual language. Consequently, English often becomes for deaf students a language arrived at late and learned imperfectly because of the delayed exposure both aurally and in print.

Musselman also writes, “In addition to limited spoken language, deafness usually results in poor knowledge of the semantics and syntax of the spoken language. Studies of deaf individuals throughout the life span show limited vocabulary acquisition, coupled with limited knowledge of the multiple meanings of words. Knowledge of grammatical rules is delayed, with particular problems evident in verb tenses and the rules for producing coordinate and compound sentences. In terms of reading, most deaf teenagers and adults are severely delayed, with reading comprehension skills usually reaching a plateau at a grade 4 or 5 level (2000, p. 10).”

This incomplete start on becoming a literate citizen is further exacerbated by the expectation of hearing people that deaf people will learn the same way they do and become like them, able to speak English. Historically, hearing people have dictated the literacy learning experiences of deaf people. Perhaps unsurprisingly, “Unfortunately, previous curriculum efforts devoted to improving literacy of deaf children frequently have focused on trying to teach them the particular skills and strategies that work for hearing children, even though deaf and hearing children often have very different background knowledge and learning strategies (Marschark et al., 2002, pp. 179-180).” In the education of deaf children, factors often not considered in the past have included medical conditions associated with the cause of deafness, parents’ resistance to accepting their child’s deafness, and barriers to full participation in the home, the school, and the community.
EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES AND POLICY

The field of education of the deaf has a long history in the United States. Deaf people were considered uneducable until a number of pioneers became involved in efforts to include them in society. In 1814, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet met his first deaf pupil, Alice Cogswell, and started teaching her how to read and write. At that time, however, there was no systematic approach to educating deaf students in the United States, so he traveled in 1815 to Europe, where he met with educators in England and France. There he observed how the English used spoken language and lipreading (speechreading) to instruct their deaf students in learning how to speak. In France, he saw how deaf students and their teachers used sign language.

Gallaudet brought back to the United States a deaf French teacher, Laurent Clerc, in 1816, and one year later, the two men founded the first school for deaf students in the United States, the American Asylum for the Deaf, in Hartford, Conn. The grassroots efforts to establish this school, which involved parents of deaf students lobbying the state legislature, spread to other states, which established their own schools throughout the 1800s. Each of these schools employed different means of communicating with and educating their students, ranging from the sign-language based approach used at the Connecticut school to the oral approach used at schools in Massachusetts and New York.

As time progressed, interest in postsecondary education for deaf students motivated Edward Miner Gallaudet to take on the presidency of the Columbia Institution in Washington, DC. This college, the first exclusively for deaf students, was founded by Congress in 1864 and renamed Gallaudet College in 1894 in honor of Thomas Hopkins
Gallaudet, father of the college’s president. In their teaching approaches, the faculty at this college used American Sign Language.

Controversy over the “best” communication method in schools had been brewing for years, and it came to a head in 1880 at Milan, Italy, where the International Conference of Teachers of the Deaf was held. At that meeting, educators of the deaf from all over the world convened and voted to ratify a resolution that said:

The Congress—Considering the incontestable superiority of speech over signs in restoring the deaf-mute to society, and in giving him a more perfect knowledge of language. Declares—that the oral method ought to be preferred to that of signs for the education and instruction of the deaf and dumb.

This resolution passed almost unanimously. Edward Miner Gallaudet was one of the opponents, and Alexander Graham Bell, a proponent of oral education and himself a teacher of the deaf, was in favor. The stage was set from this point on for the still unresolved argument as to the best approach for communication and education for deaf people. Interestingly, hearing people have been the primary actors in this controversy since its inception (Bender, 1981).

This long-standing controversy began its roots not just in a disagreement over whether deaf students should be taught sign language or speech. It focused on the entire purpose of educating deaf people. The “oralists,” led by Bell, whose wife was deaf, but never learned sign language, and whose mother was hard of hearing and could play the piano, but had difficulty speechreading, sought to make deaf people like hearing people. In other words, deafness was considered a calamity, and the only way to resolve this problem was to integrate deaf people into a hearing world as much as possible, forcing them to
speak and preventing them from using sign language. On the other hand, the “manualists,” led by Gallaudet, whose mother was deaf and had poor oral skills and a 3rd grade education, were interested in preparing deaf people for lives and careers after school, and sign language as a visual language was a very efficient way of communicating for deaf people. “While Thomas Gallaudet and his son Edward Miner Gallaudet, who carried forward his father’s work, tried to turn their students into educated, happy, and well-adjusted deaf adults, Bell wanted them to become as much like hearing people as possible (Poor, 2007, p. 7).” Ironically, Bell himself was a skilled sign language user.

At the turn of the century in 1900, nearly all deaf students in school were enrolled at residential educational institutions specifically for deaf students. Right around this time, a sort of purge took place in the schools, with many deaf teachers fired and sign language forbidden. The most common educational approach used during this period was oral education, with emphasis on speech training and therapy (Burch, 2004).

By 1961, the population of residential deaf students had dropped by about half, and with the growth of deaf students attending public day schools, the need to address their educational needs was more apparent (Stuckless & Castle, 1979). Furthermore, between 1963 and 1965, an epidemic of rubella in the United States deafened more than 8,000 children born during this time (Trybus, Karchmer, Kerstetter, & Hicks, 1980).

During this same time period, Congress had convened the Advisory Committee on the Education of the Deaf to study the education and employment status of deaf people. The final report, completed in March 1965 and called the Babbidge Report, essentially noted that programs serving deaf students were failing to prepare them to participate successfully in society. Of the deaf people in the workforce, 80 percent were employed in
manual occupations, compared with only about 50 percent of adult hearing workers. Deaf people’s occupational options at that time were much more limited than those of hearing people (Scouten, 1984).

A few years after the children of the rubella bulge began enrolling in schools, the U.S. Congress passed Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (P.L. 93-112) and followed up with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142). These two laws expanded opportunities for deaf students in their education. If they chose to attend schools for the deaf, they could; they also could attend their nearby public school and be mainstreamed with hearing peers. Communication methods used in schools were not legislated and consequently varied widely.

Educational opportunities at the postsecondary level also grew for deaf students in response to the Babbidge Report. Congress founded a second college for deaf students in 1965, the National Technical Institute for the Deaf in Rochester, New York, and numerous smaller programs throughout the United States. At the time of this writing, more than 125 such programs offer deaf students educational access and instruction (King, DeCaro, Karchmer, & Cole, 2001). Gallaudet University remains the only institution exclusively for deaf undergraduates, however, with the others based on campuses that also educate hearing students.

If we consider the available options they can choose from, deaf students today are no longer perceived as uneducable. However, they still are not perceived as successful in school despite all the educational options legally available to them.
BELIEFS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE HEGEMONIC HEARING COMMUNITY

The role of school in the United States is to prepare students to become responsible citizens and participate in a democratic society. To this end, “With students' social futures in mind, schools privilege certain cultural tools, in particular speech, and reward specific ways of using and ordering them to encourage students to arrive at the optimal developmental destinations (Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 2000, p. 166).” Students who “fail” to achieve skill or success at using these cultural tools, in particular academic English, are denied literate citizenship, especially if they are disabled or deaf. Kliewer, Biklen, and Kasa-Hendrickson put this in stark terms, “According to definition and convention, the degenerate and the defective could not function as full and literate citizens of society (2006, p. 168).”

Furthermore, the success (or failure, more accurately) of deaf students has not only historically been measured through comparisons with hearing peers, it also has historically been studied through a medical “deficit” lens (Brueggemann, 2004, p. 3). These studies tend to report on the deafness as a severe handicap rather than a difference in expression or reception, reinforcing the tendency to expect deaf people to be like hearing people, as the “oralist” education tradition of the past dictated. One need only to review past issues of The Volta Review, published by the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, to get a glimpse of this research tradition. Articles focus on speech and spoken language development, with great emphasis on how deaf children can fit into their hearing families (see, for example, Yoshinaga-Itano & Sedey, 2000).

This paradigm is slowly being changed with more recent scholarship on the literacy of deaf students using the lens of what these students can do rather than what they cannot
do. Much of this type of research is being published by the Gallaudet University Press (American Annals of the Deaf and numerous books) and the Oxford University Press (Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education along with numerous books). However, deaf and hard-of-hearing students who now are in college have been taught by professionals influenced by the earlier research tradition, which measures deaf students’ achievement against standards established by hearing people that, for reasons already explained, are often not appropriate for deaf students.

**Definition of Academic English Literacy**

In the context of college, academic English literacy implies not only the ability to read and write clear grammatical English, but also to employ that English for the purpose of communication and persuasion and success in the liberal arts and other academic arenas that call for English literacy skills. More specifically, college English or academic English literacy incorporates not just skill in using the English language per se, but some mastery of standard written English, using rhetorical forms and vocabulary shared by all who participate in this context, including instructors and students. One cannot earn a college degree without academic English literacy.

Furthermore, “traditional” approaches to language teaching in U.S. schools have focused “on discrete units of language taught in a structured, sequenced curriculum with the learner treated as a passive recipient of knowledge (Collier, 1995, p. 9).” Consequently, competency in English has traditionally been measured through an oversimplified approach using language proficiency tests that disregard communicative competence and focus instead on discrete language skills (Cummins, 1984). This, then, is the paradigm driving expectations at the college level.
According to Logan, college English focuses primarily on “the study of words, the study of correctness, and the study of Eurocentric texts (2006, p. 110).” She offers a more expansive definition of college English in the context of what she sees as “the need to develop nondiscursive communication skills (2006, p. 107).” For Logan, “College English ought to provide students with certain communicative skills that enable them to analyze rhetorical effect and produce rhetorically effective texts, including those to be read, those to be viewed as images, those to be heard, and those not to be heard (2006, p. 107).” At the time of this study, however, the expectations of college English performance are restricted to written output, for the most part.

This context, or situation network (Gee, 1999), of academic English also includes certain rules and protocol that instructors and administrators expect students to follow. Success at acquiring academic English literacy therefore also means success at obtaining, understanding, and complying with these protocols on the part of students in the situation network of college English. However, such success may not rely entirely on achieving the specific skills noted. It may also depend on the willingness of instructors and administrators to certify this competency. In other words, success may be defined as the conferral of literate citizenship in most cases, but not in the case of deaf students, as this study shows.

According to Freire, the relationship between literacy and one’s position in the world is a discursive one, one that begins with first understanding the world in which one lives:

Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world. As I suggested earlier, this movement from the word
to the world is always present; even the spoken word flows from our reading of the world. In a way, however, we can go further and say that reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of writing it or rewriting it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work. For me, this dynamic movement is central to the literacy process. (1987)

If we accept Freire’s definition of literacy, that one must know one’s world to be able to read and write one’s world (Freire & Macedo, 1987), deaf people are in an interesting position. Like members of other disadvantaged or unprivileged groups, deaf people often must function in a world mostly not of their making. Furthermore, they must somehow learn to understand this world, which is expressed by the makers of the world, who are primarily hearing, in a spoken, oral way, a way that is inaccessible to most deaf people. Not having this information is a great disadvantage, especially within Freire’s paradigm. Therefore, becoming literate in such circumstances presents special challenges.

Significance of the Study

Research focusing on the experiences of deaf students within a hearing academic English environment is extremely limited. We really do not know what it is that deaf and hard-of-hearing students experience in academic English contexts in college. We know about the feelings of disenfranchisement in general experienced by such students in mainstream college situations (see Menchel, Foster, etc.), but these ethnographies do not explore the actual phenomena of what takes place in this academic English situation network, nor do they permit the student participants to define the meaning of the phenomena. They do not describe the participation of these students as they negotiate the process of attempting to become literate citizens.
This gap brought forth the primary research question for this phenomenological study: What are the narrated college academic English literacy acquisition experiences and practices of a group of deaf and hard-of-hearing students at a hearing university with a large deaf student population?

The study, composed of extensive interviews in which I gathered narratives from my participants, allowed me to carry out paradigmatic analysis of narratives about a particular academic English phenomenon. Paradigmatic analysis focuses on locating common themes in narratives collected as data and is accomplished by examining the data “to identify particulars as instances of general notions or concepts” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 13). It is a highly recursive process. According to Polkinghorne, “The paradigmatic analysis results in descriptions of themes that hold across the stories or taxonomies of types of stories, characters, or settings (1995, p. 12).”

This analysis shed light upon the corollary research question: How does this inform us about their perceptions of academic English literacy acquisition? Understanding the taxonomies of the phenomena and themes that my student participants discuss is essential to understanding the meaning they make of their academic English literacy acquisition experiences and their engagement with their own literacy. My student participants’ narratives are problem-centered, reflecting the meaning that they individually and collectively have created about their college English experiences. We see a unity and coherence in these narratives (Mishler, 1995). According to Polkinghorne, “Stories are concerned with human attempts to progress to a solution, clarification, or unraveling of an incomplete situation (1995, p. 7).”

RESEARCH PARADIGM
The paradigm driving my research questions is critical theory, a postmodern attempt to reconsider the world in which this study is framed. I aim to position the experiences of my participants, as they describe them, within the context of the situation that frames these experiences in order to support the interpretations of these experiences. In other words, my study presents the meaning that my participants make of a world not entirely of their making for the purpose of ultimately changing this world so that my participants can engage more fully and fairly and attain the literate citizenship they strive to earn.

As a privileged and highly literate deaf person who also is a teacher of students like my participants, I share qualities with members of each of the groups discussed in this study: deaf and hard-of-hearing students and their English teachers. In my position as a researcher, I show how these qualities at times collide, nearly always to the detriment of the students rather than the teachers, resulting in difficulty and frustration.

True literacy is a lifelong process that involves these elements (knowledge, experience, participation), and often deaf people get a late start on it, if at all. Their success in school depends on their successful acquisition of literacy in all its forms and on their teachers reifying their progress.

Literate citizenship for deaf people is not an unreasonable goal. There are examples in history of communities that comfortably integrated deaf and hearing members, most notably Martha’s Vineyard from about 1690 to the mid-20th century (Groce, 1985). In the 19th century in the United States, the normal incidence rate for deafness in the population was approximately 1 out of every 5,700 people, but on Martha’s Vineyard the incidence was 1 out of every 155. As a result, everyone in the community knew some sign language.
at the very least, and many were proficient. This access promoted communication and participation by everyone in the community, and deafness was not considered a handicap. For these people, deaf and hearing, life together apparently was no big deal, and everyone shared the same knowledge and experience. Everyone was on an equal footing in their citizenship. John Dewey would have approved (Dewey, 1966).

Why is participation in the community, both the larger dominant one and the smaller academic one, important? It promotes literacy, which allows participants to interact in and shape a common world. Philosophically, I believe that if we are all living in the same world, we all should be involved in shaping it. But understanding it first is important if we as individuals are to effectively change aspects of it, especially if we are deaf people who wish to educate our hearing peers and work together to make a fully shared world. As Freire reminds us, we need to understand the larger world as well as the world we know intimately, which might be the world of our family or our home community. The Martha’s Vineyard situation illustrates how sharing a world can be mutually advantageous and non-threatening.

We are making progress in improving the educational experience of our deaf students, but we have not yet succeeded in effectively and widely helping them achieve the same levels of literacy as their hearing peers. “In the more than twenty years since Furth showed that deaf students are as intelligent as hearing students, expectations for deaf children may have been raised and face-to-face communication in the classroom may have improved, but no appreciable gain in literacy levels has been documented (Akamatsu, 1998, p. 37).”
Improving literacy levels for deaf people will enable them to participate on a more level playing field with hearing people and therefore more effectively influence the dominant paradigm, moving it toward one of greater inclusion and flexibility of outlook regarding the definition of “success.” In my opinion, a deaf person does not have to become like a hearing person to be successful, but possessing the same literacy skills and knowledge as hearing people can go far toward facilitating success in the hearing world. In other words, we must be willing to grant literate citizenship. The hearing world includes college English, and this study explores this element through the experiences of 11 deaf college students, who have much to tell us.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In the current study, I review past educational practices and perspectives in order to provide a context for understanding the narrated college academic English literacy acquisition experiences and practices of a group of deaf and hard-of-hearing students at a hearing university with a large deaf student population. I show how this context has shaped their perceptions of academic English literacy acquisition and influenced their positions as literate citizens in college.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
Deaf students’ incomplete or delayed language and cognitive development in school commonly result from unsuccessful language learning and cause difficulty acquiring the literacy valued in school and society. Most deaf students possess only marginal (if any) literacy; they read and write English with great difficulty because their school experiences have cut them off from engaging in the kind of psychosocial and cognitive development that facilitates this kind of language learning and promotes literacy. The effect of our educational system so far on deaf students as a group has resulted in poor English literacy and disenfranchisement from society at large because deaf students have not been fully included in society and consequently have not been able to develop the language, the cognitive skills, and the appropriate cultural tools, including control of appropriate discourses, that would enable them to succeed in the same ways that their hearing peers have succeeded.
ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN LITERACY

A society and its culture will exhibit prevailing paradigms, including a specific language as well as social values and educational and career expectations. A society also will be composed of groups of people who may not be able to access those paradigms easily, particularly language. Language is essential for communication and transmission of culture, which incorporates social norms, shared values, and common ethics, among other elements.

Most importantly, language is the means through which members of society share tools and symbols. It is a mental tool used to solve problems and control one’s environment and behavior. It is also a cultural tool because it has been created and shared by most members of a specific culture. Because language is a shared tool and continually undergoes transformations and evolutions, it has a powerful influence on human thinking and cognitive development. In fact, Vygotsky wrote, “speech [language] plays an essential role in the organization of higher psychological functions (Vygotsky, 1978).”

According to those who follow Vygotsky, the greater one’s control of language, the stronger one’s cognitive abilities and potential for continued development, growth, and participation in society. Bodrova and Leong elaborate, “Opportunities to hear and practice language will directly influence the future development of higher mental functions” (Bodrova & Leong, 1996). Similar shared language learning experiences among learners promote development of similar higher mental functions along with signs in those learners. Such shared experiences create and maintain society and culture. Vygotsky did not believe in a single universal way of thinking or logical process among humans; he believed that all cognition is directly influenced by culture.
Kozulin says that culture and learning cannot be separated because one of the main purposes for learning is the transmission of culture. In the same vein, he says that literacy is one of the most powerful psychological tools in human development (Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev, & Miller, 2003). Literacy can be defined as not merely being able to read and write, but also being able to participate in the discourse of the society in which one lives and works. “Reading and writing skills focus on the individual whereas literacy is essentially a social phenomenon (Paul, 1998, p. 11).” Discourse is interaction in language with many embedded meanings that need to be understood by participants for fully shared understanding. “Discourse is language use relative to social, political, and cultural formations—it is language reflecting social order but also language shaping social order, and shaping individuals’ interaction with society (Jaworski & Coupland, 1999, p. 3).”

Language is a major type of symbolic representation, one of the most important for cognitive development since it is created and shared by members of the society in which it is used. In Western cultures, language is primarily conveyed through verbal mediational means, or speech, in formal instruction (Wertsch, 1991). The discourse of school almost always takes place through spoken language and its written representation.

However, in society, which is composed mainly of hearing people, deaf people often are cut off from access to that society’s language, which is a spoken language, not a signed language. As a result, deaf people often are not full participants in society. The main reason for deaf people’s lack of access to society’s language is the simple fact that in a world that relies on spoken language intended to be heard, people who cannot hear miss out on this language and consequently on subsequent development of the particular
cultural tools and cognitive skills needed for full participation in that society and the society’s discourses.

As a result, deaf people cannot succeed in this world according to these rules. Branson and Miller clarify, “All the processes associated with the disablement of people who are deaf are linked to their assumed inability to communicate. The central issue is language (2002, p. 59).” This exclusion over time has reinforced the perception that deaf people cannot communicate and therefore cannot become literate.

Such exclusion is not limited to deaf people; it has been noted in other marginalized populations, such as people disabled by medical conditions that prevent them from functioning the same way as “normal” people. People with cerebral palsy or autism or other conditions frequently are unable to participate in traditional schooling and therefore cannot develop or demonstrate the literacy expected in school. Their intelligence and ability is denigrated because they cannot express them in the ways valued by society. As Kliewer and Biklen explain, “The metaphor of the ladder to literacy belies a cultural determination that the use of written language and symbols as a social tool is predicated by cognitive development. Thus, individuals with severe disabilities are commonly found stalled at a readiness stage where proof of intellect is demanded, an exceedingly difficult task when symbol use is profoundly restricted (2001, p. 5).” Just as with severely disabled people, deaf people frequently are unable to prove their intellectual ability and literacy in ways deemed acceptable by society and consequently are denied literate citizenship.

DEFINITION AND POLITICS OF LITERACY

Over the years in the United States, literacy has been a highly politicized issue. Even the simple ability to offer a signature could confer the power to own property or vote in
elections. However, literacy is more than the traditional definition of mastery of basic skills in reading and writing. It entails acquisition of language and, consequently, mastery of discourse, typically within the family and home first and then in school and other milieux (Gee, 1996). Dominant literacy is control of the written expression and reception of language used in the discourse of dominant members of society. In the context of this paper, dominant members of society are hearing people, not deaf people.

In United States society and in others around the world, literacy is the vehicle for sharing information and, at times, power. Without literacy, people are not usually able to fully participate in societal endeavors such as elections or career advancement opportunities (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Consequently, in an effort to educate citizens to participate in society, the attainment of literacy has been the primary endeavor of schools. However, possession of dominant literacy historically has been limited to privileged members of elite cultural groups, who had access to and control over information that could shape lives, their own and others’ (Kaestle et al., 1993).

Literacy affects all people, whether they possess it or not, and it has historically affected most negatively those people whose grasp of the dominant literacy is weak or nonexistent. Examples of those who have been damaged by dominant literacy include slaves and poor people, who could not afford to go to school and who, through being denied access to culturally important information, were condemned to servitude and poverty. Women also were denied education and the right to vote, making them powerless for years. Deaf people have long been included among those with limited literacy.

To be less than literate and to be powerless creates situations of dependence that also cause disenfranchisement from full participation in society. Society is composed
primarily of people with full or functional hearing; people with hearing loss compose approximately ten percent of the general population. And 90% of the deaf population is born to hearing parents, which creates a special kind of dependence above and beyond the conventional parent/child relationship (Schirmer, 1994). Ethnographic studies of deafness have revealed a discord between deaf and hearing people that has resulted in deep frustration on the part of deaf people, who feel oppressed and disenfranchised by the dominance of hearing people (Erting, 1985; Markowitz & Woodward, 1978). This experience of disenfranchisement impairing school learning is not limited to deaf people, as Panofsky notes, “The differential experiences of schooling reflect larger conflicts in society and constitute a form of symbolic violence suffered by low-income learners (Panofsky, 2003, p.427).”

Despite the fact that deaf people's experiences in life are rather different from hearing people's for a large number of reasons, deaf people are still judged by hearing standards, which can be totally inappropriate, especially in the area of literacy. Simply by being deaf, which connotes the inability to hear, and consequently in the minority of a population that is predominately hearing, deaf people are very often shut out of incidental learning opportunities that contribute to literacy. For hearing people, incidental learning occurs through exposure to language, including language not directed to them, which does not easily, if at all, happen for deaf people.

Exposure to language is an essential component of socialization, a critical element of literacy. Successful socialization for deaf students, which promotes their literacy, “requires access to both formal and informal communication with peers and teachers, peer relationships, and participation in extracurricular activities. Individuals who are deaf or
hard of hearing may experience limitations in all of these areas because of altered 
communication, societal misconceptions, and prejudice about hearing loss (Bain, Scott, & 
Steinberg, 2004).” Deaf students who are unable to access these traditional types of 
communication and relationships often find themselves hindered in their quest to become 
literate citizens.

Such hindrances should be removed, as Kliewer and Biklen argue, through 
reconsideration of deaf and disabled people as equally capable of literate citizenship 
through their unique positions in their communities and recognizing that they make 
significant contributions, if only they are acknowledged and appreciated. “We believe that 
the issue is not one of better demarcating who has, and who does not have, severe 
disabilities. We must shed the use of the label all together. It serves only to obscure and 
objectify individuals, forcing them into segregated realms apart from the normal patterns 
of regular lives. In effect, when labeled as having mental disabilities, individuals are 
commonly cast into situations that actually construct their mental disabilities (Kliewer & 
Biklen, 2001, p. 12).”

As a result of such limitations and many other factors, literacy among deaf people in 
general has been and continues to be abysmally low, with the average reading level of a 
deaf adult being fourth grade and for a minority deaf person, second grade or below (Nash, 
1992). Despite such bleak historical evidence and daunting ongoing challenges for them, 
deaf people continue to negotiate literacy in their pursuit of success in life, including 
careers.
LITERACY OF DEAF PEOPLE IN SCHOOL

In the United States, deaf people experience pervasive literacy problems. Large numbers of deaf high school students have been leaving school systems with much weaker reading skills than their hearing counterparts. “For the 17-year-olds and the 18-year-olds in the deaf and hard of hearing student norming sample, the median Reading Comprehension subtest score corresponds to about a 4.0 grade level for hearing students (Holt et al., 1997).” This level of reading achievement barely falls within the definition of literacy offered by the National Literacy Act (Public Law 102-73) of 1991 as “an individual’s ability to read, write, and speak in English and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one’s goals and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.”

The aforementioned definition of literacy emphasizes individual effort and success and elides over the sociocultural aspects of literacy. Its language reflects the influence of Edward Thorndike on the U.S. educational system, with its emphasis on measurable outcomes. Even before Thorndike, Vygotsky recognized that simply having the ability to write or to speak intelligibly does not assure real language or real knowledge, which can be more difficult to measure.

Until now, writing has occupied too narrow a place in school practice as compared to the enormous role that it plays in children’s cultural development. The teaching of writing has been conceived in narrowly practical terms. Children are taught to trace out letters and make words out of them, but they are not taught written language. The mechanics of reading what is written are so emphasized that they overshadow written language as such.
Something similar has happened in teaching spoken language to deaf-mutes. Attention has been concentrated entirely on correct production of particular letters and distinct articulation of them. In this case, teachers of deaf-mutes have not discerned spoken language behind these pronunciation techniques, and the result has been dead speech (Vygotsky, 1978).

Historically, deaf students have been expected to focus on developing skills valued by hearing people, particularly speech, frequently to the exclusion of other aspects of education, and this is what Vygotsky refers to. They have learned to speak, to utter words, but they have nothing to say because their teachers have not shared or created knowledge with them, nor have they shown their students how to express themselves. In other words, they are not literate enough to be able to participate successfully in the discourse of school. “As Vygotsky (1978) observed, neither writing nor speaking is reducible to technical performance. Without meaning, each loses its heart. The same appears to be true for teaching language (Florio-Ruane, 1985).”

This “dead speech” phenomenon is a good example of the insistence of school on privileging what Wertsch calls “the voice of decontextualized rationality” (Wertsch, 1990, p. 120). Instead of using “contextualized forms of representation’ to represent events and objects in terms of their concrete particularity (Wertsch, 1990, p. 120),” school demands the use of a different discourse, one that requires representation of the same events and objects in an arbitrary, but privileged code that bears little or no resemblance to the actual contexts in which these events or objects might appear. This code removes these events and objects from their real life contexts and re-labels them in a formal system that exists independently of real life and can be accessed through abstract associations across various
contexts. If one does not understand this abstract code, one cannot access this privileged voice of school.

For deaf people, the decontextualized nature of formal education often prevents the kind of literacy acquisition needed for success. Literacy acquisition can be experienced and revealed through three forms of mediation: tools, signs/symbols, and social interaction. Language becomes a tool for students to process an empirical experience into an abstract understanding (often a sign) that then propels their development to the point where they can undertake more complex tasks.

However, in most school situations, stored knowledge (Egan & Gajdamaschko, 2003) is coded in a way that is difficult to access for deaf people. In the United States, it is stored through the use of academic English, a formal, relatively context-independent and elaborated representation of spoken language. Spoken language is inherently difficult to access by those who do not hear, making it a difficult, if not useless tool for deaf people to use as a tool for literacy learning.

Not only that, the spoken discourse of schools incorporates abstract or scientific concepts as ways of labeling empirical experience. “So, for example, the child learns to define terms, even though the referent of the term may be only vaguely apprehended. Thus the child may have a rich understanding of the spontaneous concept brother but not be able to define it in a logical, conceptual way (e.g., “male sibling”) (Panofsky, John-Steiner, & Blackwell, 1990).” This inability to use scientific concepts (male sibling) to express one’s generalized or abstract understanding of brother is more than simply a vocabulary development problem. It is a language and discourse problem, a perfect example of the privileging of what Wertsch calls the voice of decontextualized rationality.
Many deaf students possess much of the same empirical knowledge that their hearing peers do, but lack the scientific concepts associated with such knowledge, typically acquired through reading widely and effectively. This vocabulary and concept deficit prevents them from fully developing the kind of literacy or participating in the discourse that schools promote.

In fact, considerable research has been conducted on the factors influencing deaf students’ reading skills, particularly in the areas of prior knowledge, metacognition, and working memory (Paul, 2003). These studies have focused on specific outcomes, such as word identification and the use of phonology, being sought by researchers in search of particular reading skills. In light of the historically poor results produced by deaf subjects in these studies, it may be that those outcomes do not match or are colored by expectations of the researchers instead of truly measuring deaf students’ reading skills or comprehension. This past focus on these research outcomes has typically not provided strategies for improvement in these skills. Paul criticizes this research paradigm, “Investigations should not just seek to reveal deficiencies; there needs to be an attempt to use the information to improve both processing and knowledge of printed material (2003, p. 106).” Newer research efforts influenced by reader-response theory are showing promise in finding links between what deaf students are able to do and what they need to do to succeed in school (Paul, 2003, p. 105). Paul predicts, “Future research on deaf and hard-of-hearing students is likely to be influenced by the emerging sociocultural paradigms with a strong emphasis on task and content factors (2003, p. 106).”

This new reader response purview of research includes human mediators, a concept promoted by Vygotsky for working with deaf children. In 1925, when Vygotsky said, “The
chief principle upon which our schools are based is that education is considered as a part of social life; school is an organization where children participate in the life which surrounds them,” he meant that deaf children’s education should be included in this principle (Vygotsky, 1925). This social life to which he refers includes more experienced others, such as teachers and older students, to help learners in their own zones of proximal development (ZPD) to develop the ability to do tomorrow what they cannot do alone today. If deaf students work with others who can communicate with them, perhaps they can begin to understand how to develop their language and cognitive abilities and, consequently, their literacy. However, such a successful social aspect often is missing from many deaf students’ educational experiences.

As part of their learning experience with more experienced others who can mediate the experience by working with the students in their ZPDs, appropriate learning activities can play crucial roles. “The learning activity is aimed at mastering general concepts and reflection as an essential component of actions with these concepts. To be an agent of learning interaction means to be capable of independently (on one’s own initiative) going beyond the limits of already achieved levels of knowledge, skills, understanding, and capacity for finding ways of acting in new situations (Zuckerman, 2003).” This then is the goal for students in general, deaf students in particular, to be able to build on their own knowledge and develop their own understanding.

**Why literacy is a difficult challenge for deaf students**

Addressing the challenge of helping deaf children become literate brings forward an almost bewildering array of considerations.
Understanding and facilitating the acquisition of literacy by deaf children clearly require attention to a multitude of factors. As complex as this development task is in hearing children, it is rendered even more complex by the biological constraints attendant upon deafness and the complex sociocultural milieu within which deaf children live and grow. Even though there are parallels between deaf children and hearing children from minority language groups, they break down because most deaf children can never acquire facility in the majority language. The language that suits their capabilities—namely, one of the natural sign languages—is not the language of the majority. The task of bridging these realities is truly challenging (Musselman, 2000, p. 28).

As Musselman points out, hearing children from minority language groups who try to learn English typically possess the advantage of some competency in their native language, unlike most deaf children, who tend to possess competency in no language, not even sign language. Most deaf children are born to hearing parents, who generally do not know sign language, and consequently these children experience significant language learning delays.

Historically, deaf students have lagged far behind their hearing peers in their acquisition and mastery of English (Allen, Lam, Rawlings, & Schildroth, 1994; Babbidge, 1965; Scouten, 1984). The reasons for this circumstance are numerous, but the primary one is that their inability to hear a spoken language inhibits their ability to acquire it effectively, especially if they are deaf during the period of maximal language acquisition (from birth until approximately age 3) (Musselman, 2000; Perfetti & Sandak, 2000). English is much easier for hearing children to learn, for a variety of reasons, and hearing
children also can rely on a ready fluency in spoken English as a resource for solving difficulties in learning to read and write the language (Marschark et al., 2002; Mayer, 1999). When deaf students are not provided access to a language during their early formative years, they sustain a deficit in language learning. And they frequently do not make up the deficit in subsequent schooling. The challenges of attempting to rectify a severe deficit in language mastery under such circumstances are daunting. This is the challenge that faces not only the students themselves, but also the college professors who work with them.

Furthermore, not all teachers are prepared to work with students whose biological and genetic experience of life is different from theirs. No one can truly understand another person’s life and experience, but the gap is much greater in cases where the teacher fits the norm and the student does not. In fact, the difficulty that deaf students experience in learning English “is not readily perceived or understood by hearing people, who take hearing for granted and therefore have no reason to think about the critical relationship between the ability to hear and literacy in a speech-based language (Aldersley, 2003).”

Deviations from the norm create problems for the thing or person incorporating the deviating feature. This is particularly true for deaf people. “A biological impairment prevents a child from mastering social-cultural means and ways and acquiring knowledge at a proper rate and in a socially acceptable form. It is the child’s social milieu, however, that modifies his or her course of development and leads to distortions and delays (Gindis, 2003, p. 203).” Deaf people exemplify this circumstance: their inability to hear impairs their ability to acquire the spoken language used in their society, a major cognitive tool in that society. Their developmental path is necessarily different, and hearing teachers who
work with them face the challenge of reconciling this difference with the prevailing learning experience.

When teachers and students are unable to successfully reconcile these kinds of challenges, a vicious cycle of failure can begin. According to Gindis and Cole, a secondary disability can create a barrier by eliciting social responses that prevent the person with the disability from properly developing. “Thus, a social-cultural reaction to a subtle neurological difficulty in mastering reading and writing skills often leads to what Gerald Cole described as a ‘learned learning disability’ (Gindis, 2003, p. 203).” This is a partial explanation for deaf students’ difficulties in reading and writing, reflecting one result of the problem of trying to learn a spoken language without the ability to hear. Deaf students may not initially have a secondary disability, but their delayed language acquisition seems to create one in the school setting.

A popular emphasis in research on English literacy for deaf students is investigation of the “best” language or form of communication in classrooms for deaf students. Rather than focusing on discourse issues as they relate to sharing or creating knowledge with deaf students, educators and researchers have historically directed their attention to the use of one or another type of communication in the classroom. Akamatsu, Stewart, and Mayer criticize this popular emphasis, saying, “that by concentrating solely on the question of whether ASL or some form of English-based signing should dominate in the classroom, we have lost the forest for the trees. The complex communication needs of deaf students demand flexibility in practice and a solid theoretical underpinning” (Akamatsu, Stewart, & Mayer, 2002). In raising this issue of communication, educators seem to be implicitly recognizing and considering the need for alternative systems of symbolic representation in
the classroom that could address classroom discourse between students and teachers, focusing on content as well as language.

This concept extends to general recognition of literate citizenship for deaf and disabled people: once the learning needs of marginalized populations are met and their expressive output recognized, additional domains of literacy become revealed and understood to be worthwhile.

We recognize that not everyone will be equally adept at using printed language to connect with others and to demonstrate understanding. Clearly, some people will struggle with this culturally valued tool for expression and thought. In contrast, many of us... do engage in written language to varying degrees of effectiveness, but also have at our disposal other modes of expression. In either case, our observations for this research suggested that people who effectively supported the symbolic presence of individuals with severe intellectual disabilities sought out and engaged multiple modalities for human connection. Gardner (1991) referred to this as domains of literacy.

In whatever form, the connection between person and others, always transactional and symbolic, is constructed through sequences of action that are then interpreted as meaningful, relevant, understandable, or thoughtful. (Kliwer & Biklen, 2001, p. 10)

A final consideration in the matter of why literacy is difficult for deaf students is the entire definition of academic literacy. Deaf students are not alone in struggling with English in college; other English-language learners have shown difficulty in mastering the English required for college courses. "Experts in language acquisition are giving new
attention to a not-so-new concept: English-language learners need to move beyond knowing just ‘social English’ to acquiring ‘academic English’ to do well in school (Zehr, 2005).” Academic English includes the use of abstract phraseology and terminology, such as “This position asserts” and “approach” and “assume,” as well as extensive paraphrasing and synthesizing of written material (Zehr, 2005). This kind of discourse is not typical in everyday conversation, and for deaf people already struggling to connect with the written form of an auditory language, developing mastery of this level of language provides additional challenges.

**DISCOURSE EXPERIENCES OF DEAF STUDENTS AND HEARING TEACHERS**

A number of studies have been done on interactions and discourse that take place in classrooms of deaf children with hearing teachers. In their article, Webster and Heinemann-Gosschalk share Kress’ theory that “children meet language ... as discourse,” bringing up the whole concept of how deaf children are exposed to different modalities and experiences while learning both ASL and English (2000, p. 27).

Webster and Heinemann-Gosschalk’s study indicates that deaf adults were much more effective than hearing adults at supporting conversation with deaf children learning how to read. Schimmel and Monaghan did an early study on using deaf adults to promote deaf awareness through literature with students at the Mississippi School for the Deaf, but their study did not address ASL literature per se, focusing instead on retellings of Aesop’s fables (Schimmel & Monaghan, 1983). But these and other such studies ((Baran & Houten, 1988); (Craig & Collins, 1969); (Hartman, 1996; Jimenez-Sanchez & Antia, 1999); (Kretschmer, 1997); (Luetke-Stahlman, 1995); (Musselman & Hambleton, 1990); (Panagos, Griffith, & Ripich, 1985); (Toranzo, 1996); (D. J. Wood, Wood, Griffiths, Howarth,
Howarth, 1982); (H. A. Wood & Wood, 1984)) focus on discourse in elementary and secondary classrooms, not discourse in college classrooms between deaf students and hearing teachers.

A great deal of literacy research on deaf students also has historically tended to focus on the students’ “deficiencies” in communicating in English, whether spoken or written. Brueggemann criticizes this approach, claiming that the responsibility for such deficiencies has been wrongly placed in deaf people’s hands (Brueggemann, 2000). This perspective offers ample justification for undertaking studies to more fully understand deaf students’ literacy experiences, especially given the paucity of qualitative research in this area.

Furthermore, considering other definitions of literacy may be in order. Paul theorizes that we might reconsider setting reasonable goals for literacy of deaf people. Paul suggests that “literate thought is hypothesized to be mode independent...,” and that it can be best understood by recognizing the difference between accessing information and interpreting it (Paul, 1998). He asserts that in the United States, literacy is determined by skill in reading and writing, also known as script literacy. In view of a general consensus that this definition of literacy is not only limiting, but can be oppressive for deaf people, he proposes that we consider recognizing “performance literacy” as a valid and viable means for deaf people to access information that traditionally is presented in the print (script) mode. Performance literacy is critical and literate thought achieved and expressed through means other than reading and writing. It may be another avenue to the abstract reasoning skills demanded by academic English literacy.
COLLEGE EXPERIENCES OF DEAF PEOPLE

Despite various challenges, some deaf people attain admittance to college and demonstrate some degree of proficiency in English. Opportunities for deaf students to attend college in the United States continue to grow even as the number of deaf students is declining (Nash, 1992). Not only is the number, but the variety of postsecondary programs for this cohort is growing, and qualified deaf students have many options from which to choose. Some choose to attend regular institutions, but many others choose to attend special programs for deaf students located within hearing colleges and universities.

Numerous studies have been done at such programs, investigating different aspects of deaf students’ experiences there ((Brown & Foster, 1989); (DeCaro & Foster, 1992); (Farrugia & Austin, 1980); (Foster, 1986, 1989); (Foster & Brown, 1986); (Foster & Elliot, 1986, 1987); (Murphy & Newlon, 1987); (Saur, Layne, & Hurley, 1981); (Saur, Layne, Hurley, & Opton, 1986); (Schroedel & Watson, 1991); (Walter, 1987, 1989); (Walter, Foster, & Elliot, 1987)). Most of the participants of these studies were deaf students enrolled in special programs, but who also took all or most of their courses with hearing students. Because of their grouping with other deaf students in the same special programs, the participants benefited from that peer support group on campus while they retained the option to interact with hearing students. Their critical mass also enabled them to benefit from a comprehensive array of special services readily available, such as interpreters, notetakers, and real-time captioning services. Some participants were individual deaf students who experienced feelings of isolation on their hearing college campuses and who had to struggle more to obtain support services (Murphy & Newlon, 1987). The descriptions of these educational access experiences, however, do not address literacy acquisition during
college per se. Their value lies in presenting other elements of the college experience for deaf students, leaving open for description the academic English acquisition experience of these students.

Qualitative research that presents and analyzes narratives by deaf people regarding their college literacy experiences is scarce. Of the few studies that included extensive interviews, three were doctoral dissertations.

In his dissertation (1995), Menchel explored the experiences of 33 individual deaf students mainstreamed with hearing students at various colleges in the Northeast. His study, which included interview data, presented the reasons why these students chose to attend hearing universities, such as prior experience and correlated comfort levels with mainstreamed school settings, preference for a degree from a “name” college, and desire for academic challenge. The study also presented characteristics of these students, such as high motivation, goal orientation, and personal responsibility with involvement in social and extracurricular activities. Findings included the discovery that the students were generally satisfied with their decisions, despite having to overcome certain challenges, particularly obtaining access and support services (such as note takers and interpreters) on campus. This study did not specifically address literacy issues in college, however, and it focused on students who were the only deaf students at their universities.

Another study took a different approach, looking at literacy issues revealed by deaf students in a deaf college. In her dissertation (1998), Wood explicated the English academic system and its related discourse issues at Gallaudet University, a land grant college that features a dominant population of more than 1,000 deaf students. This study focused on the formation, recognition, and demonstration of literate identities as they were
revealed in the life stories told by deaf undergraduates. These undergraduates were enrolled in one of two types of courses, English major courses and English language development courses. The data from these undergraduates were drawn from videotaped narratives by the students of their own life stories, in response to the prompt, “Tell me the story of your growing up—in connection with reading and writing English.” Wood concluded that the social institution under study promoted certain literacies that revealed themselves in the discourses of the institution’s deaf undergraduates. These literacies also served as identities for the undergraduates through which they either supported or transgressed the institution’s English system. For example, the deaf students with strong English skills tended to be placed in higher level English courses and subsequently felt validated by the system, whereas some students with weaker English skills transgressed the system by repudiating the system’s pejorative consideration of them.

The role of literacy in American Sign Language and English in the overall, not just collegiate, life experiences of five deaf individuals was the focus of Karen Kimmel’s dissertation (1996). Kimmel interviewed five deaf learners and asked them to describe their acquisition of literacy in both American Sign Language and English. She also asked them to describe whatever power they felt they had to reflect on their literacy and to determine the course of their lives in these languages. She found that these deaf people continued to negotiate literacy in their pursuit of success in life, including careers, despite experiences of marginalization, isolation, and impaired identity formation. Findings revealed the importance of sociocultural context at home and at school in the formation of identity and the development of literacy skills.
Only recently was a study done specifically addressing the college cohort’s literacy experience. Toscano, McKee, and Lepoutre (2002) interviewed 30 deaf postsecondary students to identify social, educational, and demographic characteristics that positively influenced their attainment of strong academic reading and writing skills. Findings correlated strongly with those identified in previous work conducted with talented hearing youth, including themes such as extensive parental involvement, early exposure to reading and writing, and positive self image. This study focused exclusively on “successful” deaf students and did not investigate their current college academic English literacy experiences, nor did it analyze discourse within their college classrooms.

SUMMARY

This review of selected literature indicates that the narrative expression of individual literacy acquisition experiences is scarce, with only Kimmel and Woods addressing it to any degree. As a colleague of mine noted in his dissertation, “We have quantified factors that correlate with success, but we have not attempted to reveal the personal and social processes in which these students engage that lead them to academic success during the first year of college (Adams, 2001, p. 5).”

In the next chapter, I present the research study design and methodology, which follow from decisions I made as a researcher to conduct a study that would fill the lacuna in the current body of knowledge regarding the meanings that deaf students reveal and describe about their academic English literacy acquisition experiences in college so that we can better understand those experiences and the processes that deaf students go through and improve our support of these students’ success in college.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

The research questions regarding the experiences and practices of a group of deaf and hard of-hearing students at a hearing university with a large deaf student population and how these experiences and practices inform us about their perceptions of academic English literacy acquisition led to the following research design and methods. The methodology for this study focused on extracting data regarding academic English literacy experiences that are missing from previous research.

RESEARCH DESIGN
The design of this study is a phenomenological study. This study collected the narrated college academic English literacy acquisition experiences and practices of a group of deaf and hard-of-hearing students at a hearing university with a large deaf student population for the purpose of understanding their perceptions of academic English literacy acquisition with the goal of improving this experience for future students.

In addressing the above-mentioned research questions from students’ own perspectives, a phenomenological study is an appropriate approach. In the phenomenological paradigm, the study is conducted in a natural setting with the entity in context, and the researcher becomes the instrument in the study, providing experiences and perspectives that are valuable to the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher also must “have personal experience with and intense interest in the phenomenon under study,” and the participants should share a similar intensity of interest (Patton, 1985, p. 71). The phenomenological research study employs inductive data analysis to provide
more understanding of the interaction of "mutually shaping influences" and to explicate the interacting realities and experiences of researcher and participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 40). In addition, it allows for emergent design "because it is inconceivable that enough could be known ahead of time about the many multiple realities to devise the design adequately" and because the diverse perspectives and values systems of researcher and participant "interact in unpredictable ways to influence the outcome" of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 41).

When we listen to the stories of others and learn more fully how they have lived their experiences, we can begin to understand the meaning that these participants make of these experiences. As Seidman puts it, “...stories are a way of knowing” (1998, p. 1). But more than just being a way of knowing, stories offer interpretations of experience that constitute a particular knowledge, a particular truth, for the storyteller and for the listener. Reconciling the interpretations is the special challenge of the phenomenological researcher, who aims to reveal as many of the contexts, issues, and values embedded within the phenomenon under study and construct reality. “Phenomenologists believe that multiple ways of interpreting experiences are available to each of us through interacting with others, and that it is the meaning of our experiences that constitutes reality. Reality, consequently, is ‘socially constructed’” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 23).

I believe my participants can help define the reality of their academic English literacy acquisition experiences by sharing their narratives. Polkinghorne elaborates, “Narrative as story is of special interest to qualitative researchers as they try to understand the fullness of human existence by including in their inquiries the unique characteristics that differentiate human existence from other kinds of existence (1995, p. 8).” Moreover,
through these students’ narratives, we can understand the unique characteristics of their academic English literacy acquisition experiences, especially as they take place in a context involving hearing peers and teachers. Such understanding is important primarily because nearly all current educational approaches used in the United States today derive from working with the majority of students, who by definition are hearing, not deaf.

Phenomenological research is a form of heuristic inquiry, which Moustakas describes as “a process that begins with a question or problem which the researcher seeks to illuminate or answer (1994, p. 17).” In the case of this study, the question I sought to illuminate was the experiences of deaf college students as they participate in the process and system of attaining academic English literacy. Understanding human experience is the entire purpose of heuristic inquiry, and the experience of these students is important to understand from the standpoint of accounting for and explaining the meanings of that experience. Moustakas elaborates, “The heuristic process is autobiographic, yet with virtually every question that matters there is also a social—and perhaps universal—significance (1994, p. 17).”

My decision to employ phenomenological research methods derives from the simple fact that most research analysis of the academic and literacy attainment of deaf students is quantitative in nature. This body of research shows abundant examples of academic achievement of deaf students, but measures statistical outcomes rather than actual life experiences. It does not reveal student experiences or responses. Nearly all of it reflects negative results: poor reading skills, low academic achievement, poor educational attainment, poor career success, and the list goes on (see Chapter 2). The reasons for these negative results have been identified and described in this research paradigm, but the
individuals who actually undergo and produce the results are not asked about their experiences. The picture presented by these studies is, in short, an incomplete picture, and the contributions of my participants in telling their stories helps to complete this picture.

In fact, Kimmel expressed my point of view in her dissertation when she wrote, “Unlike quantitative research that focused on statistical information to support an already formulated hypothesis, qualitative research demanded that I be as unbiased as possible and open to consider new findings (Kimmel, 1996, p. 58).” Through qualitative methods, the phenomenological research paradigm captures a more complete picture of individual lived experience instead of a narrow perspective of generalizations such as these traditional studies present.

Like Kimmel, I am interested in participant perspectives, which focuses on how people make meaning of their experiences. In particular, I wanted to understand how my deaf student participants made meaning of their participation in the academic English educational experience and system they underwent as part of their college programs. Like Kimmel, I also rejected ethnography as my research method of choice because it employs a lens other than participant perspectives for observation.

**Epistemological Assumptions**

My epistemological beliefs comply with the definition of structuralism/contextualism provided by Cunningham and Fitzgerald, in which “Knowers construct knowledge and are constructed by knowledge (Cunningham & Fitzgerald, 1996, p. 48).” Even as they experience phenomena and construct knowledge in response, knowers also already have been and continue to be constructed by knowledge, which I believe is socially constructed. The two, knowers and knowledge, are intertwined “in a
constructive process of transacting with ideas, either individually or within a social context” (Cunningham & Fitzgerald, 1996, p. 48) and cannot be separated.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

Deaf students’ incomplete or delayed language and cognitive development in school commonly result from unsuccessful language learning and cause difficulty acquiring the literacy valued in school and society. Most deaf students possess only marginal (if any) literacy; they read and write English with great difficulty because their school experiences have cut them off from engaging in the kind of psychosocial and cognitive development that facilitates this kind of language learning and promotes literacy. The effect of our educational system so far on deaf students as a group has resulted in poor English literacy and disenfranchisement from society at large because deaf students have not been fully included in society and consequently have not been able to develop the language, the cognitive skills, and the appropriate cultural tools, including control of appropriate discourses, that would enable them to succeed in the same ways that their hearing peers have succeeded. Understanding the experiences of college students can contribute to changing history.

RESEARCHER’S BIAS

PERSONAL HISTORY

I am a faculty member at the college where this research study took place. I teach English to deaf students in this college, from which cohort my participants were drawn, but my participants were never my students. I also am a profoundly deaf person who experienced mainstream education as the only deaf student in my classes all the way through public school and in my undergraduate studies.
As a child and teenager, I was educated in several public school systems without the educational access and support services that are now widely available to deaf students from kindergarten through high school. Somehow I mastered English, even though I am prelingually and profoundly deaf. I earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Duke University, again without any interpreters or other support, and maintained a solid B in my major. During all of my schooling, I read and wrote extensively, widely, and easily. In other words, I attained academic English literacy that promoted my success in school. I do not remember struggling with English the way that I see my students struggling.

The idea that reading and writing well are essential to success and personal advancement in life is almost universally accepted and has been true for me. I have highly refined reading and writing skills. I also happen to be deaf, a member of a group that tends to read and write poorly. My ability to read and write well has given me access not simply to information, but also to an understanding of how the world around me works.

Being literate in this way has given me access to many things. Because I do not pick up information on the fly the same way hearing people do, by overhearing things or by simply being immersed in spoken language replete with clues and data, I have had to get this information in other ways, and those ways have changed over the years. Initially, my family, my mother and brother in particular, directly told me much of the social information I needed to function appropriately among other people. Later I learned to read and immersed myself in worlds of literature that presented various models of language and life. Now I acquire my information primarily from reading on the Internet and a wide range of periodicals as well as constant interaction with my colleagues and classmates and friends. All of this has kept me in touch with the social, political, and cultural realities
around me and given me the resources to be able to build on my knowledge as I interact with others. I also have been able to participate in the rewards of literacy, including successful college education, career mobility, and opportunities for new experiences.

Because I developed strong literacy that helped me learn and follow the rules for such advancement, established by hearing people, I have personally experienced career advancement within this paradigm of social networks and knowledge, and I try to share this experience with my students as a literate citizen. However, I also believe that changing the view of hearing people is an area that offers great potential for deaf people to exert influence, and I encourage my students to consider ways that they can do this. I believe the time has come for hearing people, the dominant group, to stop expecting deaf people to be just like hearing people, and for deaf people to change this shared world by participating as fully and effectively as they can. Reading and writing well is only one way to achieve literate citizenship.

Many of my students can express themselves very clearly in American Sign Language (ASL), but the clarity and depth of these thoughts and concepts often are not reflected in their English. The one-dimensional, linear, and rule-driven nature of written English, a spoken language, simply does not correlate well to the three-dimensional, multi-layered flexibility of ASL, a visual language. Many hearing people have no idea of the complexity of many deaf people’s thoughts and literacy because of the language barrier and their hegemonic expectations surrounding the use of English. But if my students can find that bridge between their ASL and a reasonable level of English skill, perhaps they can draw strength from their ASL to bear on their use of English in the larger world.
My students who are fluent in ASL have control over a certain world that they know well and feel comfortable in. This world is an offshoot of the larger world and does not include enough employment opportunities for all of my students to be able to stay within it. If my students want to support themselves independently, without public assistance, most of them must find jobs in the larger world. The students who are able to communicate with hearing people are the ones who get jobs and can make opportunities for themselves to change the larger world. The ones who do this successfully are the ones who know themselves well as individuals and take strength from that knowledge and experience while they participate in life with others around them and change their own world. They are the ones who will be granted literate citizenship.

**RESEARCHER ROLE**

Having said all this, I was aware as a researcher for this study that I would need to put aside the preconceptions of this cohort’s literacy that I have discussed. In other words, in doing this phenomenological study with deaf and hard-of-hearing students, I knew that as a profoundly deaf person myself, I needed to make clear the distinction between my personal literacy learning experience and that of my participants. I also needed to avoid listening to my participants as a faculty member. Essentially, I needed to bracket my own experiences so that I could achieve epoche (Creswell, 1998, p. 52; Moustakas, 1994, p. 99), refraining from judgment.

Bracketing my experiences was necessary for assuring that my own prejudices did not control my data analysis. My goal was to listen to my participants’ narratives and see these experiences with fresh eyes exactly as they were presented to me. Asking open-ended questions and letting my participants explain their thoughts and actions in all the
time they needed helped me avoid jumping to familiar conclusions either as a fellow deaf person or as a teacher like the ones my participants discussed.

In interviewing my participants, I anticipated listening with "the totality of [my] being and the entirety of [my] personality (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 64)" because on many levels, I would understand them and their experiences both as a deaf student and as an English teacher. As a deaf person myself, I anticipated enhanced communication, empathy, and rapport with these students. I also was fully prepared to ensure that I did not overlay my judgment or bias on their narratives.

The risk of researcher bias aside, I believe that I was well prepared to understand and interpret my participants’ experiences as a result of my membership in the same group, and I have strived to minimize my bias as much as possible by assuming the role of "moderate participant observer" (Spradley, 1980, p. 60). This role gave me the right balance for observation and analysis in that while I already had “entre” to the experiences of my participants as a peer of sorts, my participants also understood that our interviews served the purpose of eliciting as much information as possible rather than simply being rap sessions designed to validate their experiences.

This rapport promoted the effectiveness and success of the focus group I ran as a follow-up to the interviews. Madriz explains, “A facilitator of the same race/ethnicity as participants usually enhances rapport and increases the willingness of participants to respond. A facilitator of the same racial or ethnic background contributes to participants’ feelings that the facilitator shares with them common experiences….it is especially important in the case of focus groups, where establishing rapport with the participants is key to eliciting high-quality information (2000, p. 845).” Because I am deaf, as were my
participants, I was able to lead a very animated focus group that engaged all the participants. In the focus group, I believe I was successful at revealing the multivocality of participants’ attitudes, experiences, and beliefs in the process of the focus group’s social interaction (Madriz, 2000, p. 836).

SETTING FOR THE RESEARCH

This study was conducted at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID). A model for postsecondary academic mainstreaming, NTID provides educational programs and access and support services to 1,100 deaf and hard of hearing students from around the world who study, live and socialize with 15,000 hearing students on campus. One of the eight colleges of Rochester Institute of Technology, NTID offers associate degree programs almost exclusively for deaf students, and more than half of the university’s 1,100 deaf students matriculate into these programs. The rest are enrolled in baccalaureate or master's degree programs in the other seven colleges at the university and study with hearing students. Many of the associate degree programs at NTID have articulation agreements with correlated baccalaureate degree programs within the other seven colleges.

Communication methods in the classroom and related contexts vary significantly within this university, depending on the academic program. In the associate degree programs within the college populated primarily by deaf students, instructors use a variety of communication methods, typically a combination of American Sign Language (ASL) and spoken English, because the students are almost all deaf. In the other seven colleges, which are attended by hearing students as well, deaf students enrolled in baccalaureate or
master’s degree programs work with sign language interpreters and note takers as a means of ensuring greater access to communication within those settings.

As at most other U.S. colleges, all students must take and pass one or more English composition courses. Students seeking to earn an associate of occupational studies degree will take English course offerings only within NTID’s Department of English. All of these courses can be considered developmental or remedial, designed to provide instruction in the reading and writing skills required for sub-baccalaureate degrees and for advancement into upper-level composition courses.

Other students seeking associate of applied science or bachelor’s degrees will take writing courses offered by NTID’s support department for the university’s liberal arts programs. These courses can be considered preparatory in that they provide a review of basic academic writing conventions that are expected in typical freshman composition courses.

Depending on their initial course placement test scores, some students will begin their writing courses within the English Department and progress through the developmental course sequence and then enroll in writing courses offered by NTID’s Liberal Arts Support Department. Others matriculate with higher placement scores and bypass this developmental course sequence entirely and enroll directly in baccalaureate-level composition courses.

PILOT STUDY

Because I was interested in understanding how deaf students experienced the program in which I teach, I decided to take up a pilot study to employ phenomenological research methods that would enable me to elicit the stories I wanted to know. This pilot
study modeled a pilot study conducted by Kimmel in her dissertation, in which she interviewed three deaf individuals about events in their lives and their interactions with literacy (Kimmel, 1996).

My pilot research study arose from my teaching experience, where I had observed that many deaf and hard-of-hearing students at NTID had not developed English reading and writing skills beyond the elementary level, even though they possessed the skills and ability to master technical programs offered at NTID. Many became outstanding employees in these fields, indicating strong intelligence and significant learning ability, but were weak English users.

Obviously, deaf students share the common experience of not being able to hear spoken English, particularly if they are prelingually deafened, which can impede their ability to learn how to read and write English correctly. But still, some prelingually deaf students (myself included) manage to become highly skilled users. My question then became: Can successful students share experiences that help elucidate why their learning experience was effective? Are there influences across English educational experiences that should be considered when approaching the instruction of deaf students in English?

More specifically, the overarching question seemed to be: *What experiences have deaf students had with English language learning?* Corollary questions were the following:

What particular factors within the educational setting, both in mainstream public schools as well as schools for deaf students, influenced the English learning experience of these students?

What classroom learning experiences do these students perceive as supportive and/or detrimental to their literacy learning?
What specific factors, in any context including home and community, do students credit with influencing their English learning experiences?

For this pilot study, I employed criterion sampling for participants because I believed one particular group of students could provide the information I sought: deaf students attending NTID. My criteria for selecting my sampling population included the following: college students who were 1) deaf (pure tone average of 70 dB or more in their better ear), 2) recommended by faculty members in NTID’s English Department, and 3) willing to share their experiences. This type of hearing loss typically seriously limits these students’ chances for success in a regular college program without educational access services. I selected three students.

Further criteria for student sampling included representation from a mainstream public school setting, from a school for the deaf setting, and with deaf parents. Faculty recommendations were highly subjective and based on my request for “strong writers,” which I explained to mean students who either arrived at NTID with strong English skills or who had developed them during their time at NTID. I was unable to successfully recruit a participant with deaf parents, but I did recruit participants from various school settings.

My three participants, whose names were changed for the study, included two white American males and one female from a Caribbean island, all of whom had attended school in the United States. Adam experienced three different school settings: a self-contained class for deaf children, a mainstreamed school with an interpreter as the only deaf student, and a high school for deaf students. Brenda experienced two school settings: a self-contained class for deaf children and a mainstreamed school with a special class for deaf students focusing on English. Carl attended one school, a school for deaf students, for his
entire pre-college experience. All three used ASL, and Brenda and Carl also used speech to communicate.

Two interviews were scheduled for each participant. The first interview covered participants’ educational background and early literacy learning experiences. Each initial interview was guided by the following questions:

Tell me about your background in school before college.
Can you describe your English learning experience in those schools?
Was learning English easy or hard for you?
What aspects of learning English did you enjoy or dislike?
Can you tell me about any experiences or strategies or methods you feel helped you learn English?
Tell me a story about a teacher whom you remember having a significant effect on your English learning experience.

The second interview probed at greater length about these experiences, following up on areas that were not fully clarified during the first interview. These interviews also elicited further reflective responses from participants, such as recalling their feelings or interpretations about their experiences. All interviews were videotaped and then carefully transcribed.

Findings from Pilot Study

“Sometimes I’m kind of envious of hearing people because they can hear each word, word, word. That’s why their English is better than ours. They hear word, word, word. We have to read, they don’t have to read as much as we have to. I have to use my eyes to learn, they hear it, they will learn grammar.”
Like Brenda, the deaf student quoted above, most of us assume that hearing people learn English more easily than deaf people, and this is generally true (Albertini, 1993; Mayer, 1999). The point of this pilot study was not to confirm the truth of this matter, however, but rather to understand more clearly the English learning experience of deaf students. This phenomenological study attempted to begin to understand from the participants’ own signs and words some of the elements of that experience.

My three participants showed different attitudes about their experiences learning English, with one disliking it intensely but persevering, the second finding it difficult but discovering intellectual challenges with it, and the third seeming to enjoy it but still aspiring to a higher level of proficiency. The common themes that emerged in the interviews were the following:

**English was difficult to learn**

- English has too many rules
- Vocabulary memorization was difficult and not fun
- Working on grammar was frustrating
- Working alone on English was frustrating
- English is easier for hearing people to learn

**English is important**

- Helps one communicate in the “hearing” world
- Makes parents happy
- Helps one get into college
- Essay writing has no practical value
Professional writing (reports, letters, etc.) is worthwhile

Research papers are interesting

ASL is a visual language

Helped with personal expression

Helped with understanding reading

Helped make reading come alive

Personalized instruction was effective

One on one was most effective

Caring individuals offered motivating strategies

Individual learning needs were addressed

Reading was not enjoyable

Can’t concentrate

Enjoys the story, but has no motivation to read for fun

Would rather read on the Internet than a book

The findings from this pilot study helped me formulate the larger research question that had been lurking in the background. I realized that my research questions for the pilot study had positioned the students as the primary agents of their English learning experiences, but the findings ultimately did not seem to support this position, which could be described as the lens of the traditional research paradigm, with the subjects under a microscope and larger issues and contexts blurred around them. The sense of powerlessness that pervaded my participants’ stories struck me as a source of information that could help define the meaning of the experiences described by these students. Moving away from simply cataloging events and experiences as this pilot study did and probing
further into structural meanings and themes of these experiences seemed to be the next step.

PARTICIPANTS

SELECTION

For this dissertation study, participants included 11 deaf students attending NTID. These students were deaf (pure tone average of 70 dB or more in their better ear) and willing to share their experiences. This type of hearing loss typically seriously limits these students’ chances for success in a regular college program without educational access services and therefore is a requirement for admission to this college, which provides a range of educational access and support services, including direct instruction of deaf students using speech, sign language, and other strategies that do not involve interpreters or note takers. These students have experienced courses either within the English Department or the Liberal Arts Support Department at NTID. Their initial course placement was determined both by their admission test scores as well as a writing placement test administered by the English Department during the orientation program immediately prior to the fall quarter.

At the time of the research study interviews, the characteristics of the students included the following:

Year in school:

One student was in her first year of a baccalaureate program, having already completed an AOS degree,

Two were second-year students,

Five were third-year students,
One was a fourth-year student,

Two were fifth-year students, and

Two had transferred from another college.

Placement at NTID:

One student began his NTID English career in the lowest level reading course (Nonfiction Reading I) and in the second-lowest level writing course (Academic Writing II),

Two students began in Academic Writing II,

Two students began in Academic Writing III,

Two students began in Nonfiction Reading III,

Two students began in Academic Writing IV,

One student began in Written Communication II, the second writing course in the Liberal Arts Support Department English course sequence, and

One student began in Writing and Literature I, the first composition course required of all baccalaureate students at RIT, both deaf and hearing.

Academic background:

Seven students graduated from a mainstream public high school,

Four graduated from a school for the deaf,

Three experienced education at both mainstream schools and schools for the deaf.

Personal background:

No students had been exposed to languages other than English and/or American Sign Language in their early language acquisition periods,

Two students had deaf parents, and
All but one of the students were prelingually deafened; the exception was a female who became deaf at age 3½.

**Biographies**

Jackie Frieda is a deaf Caucasian female in her 30s who also has a deaf brother and hearing parents. Her secondary schooling was as a mainstreamed student in public schools. She began her NTID career as a transfer student from a community college in the Midwest, and her first course was Academic Writing IV (required before admission to the Liberal Arts Support Dept English courses). She actually was placed in Written Communication I, but all sections of that course were full the quarter she began at NTID, so she enrolled in Academic Writing IV, the course preceding Written Communication I, in order to continue her academic writing experience. She had completed all of her English course requirements for her baccalaureate degree program in fine arts.

Sami Bradley is a deaf Caucasian female in her 20s who has deaf parents and a deaf sister. She graduated from a school for the deaf, but prior to entering the school for the deaf at age 9, she was unsuccessfully mainstreamed in public school. The first English course she took at NTID upon matriculation was Academic Writing II. She completed an associate of occupational studies degree in one of NTID’s technical programs, left college for a couple of years, and returned recently to undertake a baccalaureate program in fine arts. At the time of the interviews, she had not yet completed her English course requirements and was enrolled at the Written Communication II level.

Joseph Goino is a deaf Caucasian male in his 20s who has a deaf sister and hearing parents. He graduated from a mainstream high school after being dissatisfied with his educational experience at his school for the deaf. The first English course he took at NTID
was Academic Writing II. He was midway through his technical associate degree program at NTID, and was enrolled in Written Communication I for the second time at the time of the interviews.

Mark Smith is a deaf Caucasian male in his 30s whose parents are hearing. He graduated from a school for the deaf and enrolled in the Nonfiction Reading III course the first time he entered NTID. He completed a diploma and left college and worked for a major corporation as a disassembling technician and painter and returned to NTID after being laid off from the job he held for 10 years. At the time of the interviews, he was midway through an associate of occupational studies degree in one of NTID’s technical programs and had completed his English course requirements for that degree.

Kaylee Wallin is a Caucasian female in her 20s whose parents and siblings are hearing and who became deaf at age 3½. She graduated from a mainstream high school and at the time of the interviews was a second-year liberal arts student who enrolled in RIT’s Writing and Literature I course upon matriculation, and she aims to complete her baccalaureate degree in as short a time as possible, with the goal of earning a Ph.D.

Zara Vitch is a deaf biracial female in her 30s with hearing parents. Her pre-college educational experience included attending a variety of mainstream public schools and schools for the deaf, totaling about 15. NTID is her first true college experience, which she began two years prior to the interviews, and her first English course was Nonfiction Reading III. She was enrolled in an associate of occupational studies degree in one of NTID’s technical programs, but switched to an associate of applied science degree program, extending her English course requirements.
John Doe is a deaf Caucasian male with hearing parents and a hearing sister. He graduated from a school for the deaf and entered NTID with placement in the Written Communication II course. He has completed an associate of applied science degree in one of NTID's technical programs along with all of his English requirements and at the time of the interviews was midway through an associate of occupational studies degree in another technical program, with one more year to go.

Mike Massa is a deaf Caucasian male in his 20s with a hearing family. He graduated from a mainstream high school that had a deaf support program. When he matriculated at NTID, he enrolled in two English courses, Nonfiction Reading I and Academic Writing II. In his first five quarters at NTID, he completed all of the English courses in the departmental sequence and completed the rest of his RIT English requirements over the next two years. At the time of the interviews, he was in his final year of his baccalaureate of science degree program.

Moises Jones is a deaf Caucasian male in his 20s with a hearing family. He graduated from a mainstream high school that provided interpreter support as well as self-contained classes for deaf students. He was enrolled in a baccalaureate program at RIT after entering NTID with an Academic Writing IV placement and had completed all of his English course requirements at the time of our interviews.

Roxanne Flores is a deaf Caucasian female in her 20s with deaf parents and a deaf sister. She graduated from a school for the deaf and enrolled at NTID with an Academic Writing III placement. She had completed all of her English requirements and was enrolled in a baccalaureate program at RIT at the time of our interviews.
Kofu Brown is an African American male in his 20s who was mainstreamed throughout high school. His family is hearing. He transferred to NTID from another college with a large program for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, and at the time of the interviews, he had completed all but one of his English course requirements and was enrolled in an associate of applied science degree program at NTID.

DATA SOURCES

This research study used multiple data sources to answer the research questions (Creswell, 1998). The primary data sources were videotapes of the individual formal interviews that I conducted with each participant and of the focus group conducted with five members of this research study cohort.

The secondary data sources were transcripts of the interviews and focus groups and the notes that I made while analyzing the transcripts. These notes ranged from journal entries and observations to a detailed Excel spreadsheet in which I noted themes and concepts emerging from the primary data. The transcription of these interviews is discussed later in this chapter.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

To assure the trustworthiness of my data, I employed several verification procedures recommended by Creswell and Seidman. My first step was to clarify my researcher bias. Before beginning the interviews for this study, I reviewed each of the questions I planned to ask my participants and answered them myself in detail, in a personal narrative of my own English learning experiences. This process allowed me to understand what my participants would go through during their interviews at the same time that it revealed my researcher bias. My discussion of my role in this study, earlier in
this chapter, outlines my past experiences, orientations, biases, and prejudices that I have brought to bear on this study.

My second step was to establish an interviewing structure for this study that would permit cross-checking of data and interpretations. Seidman suggests a three-interview process for the purpose of providing a structure in which time passes and the participants have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and prior responses before continuing to explore further into their meaning making (Seidman, 1998). I modified Seidman’s approach by doing two in-depth interviews with each participant and by using a focus group with five of the participants to provide additional depth of information as well as verification of what individuals shared in their private interviews.

The timing of the focus group after all the interviews had been completed was deliberate and successful. The participants elaborated on their own experiences as they affirmed one another’s experiences, in effect conducting a type of member check (Creswell, 1998) in that they confirmed the credibility of the interpretations shared among themselves. As Morgan explains, “On the one hand, focus groups cannot really substitute for the kinds of research that are already done well by either individual interviews or participant observation. On the other hand, focus groups provide access to forms of data that are not obtained easily with either of the other two methods (1997, p. 8).”

Continuing this vein of verification, I later sent each participant the transcripts from their interviews for their review and comment, and they confirmed in their responses the accuracy and credibility of these transcripts.
DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

In September 2004, I identified and invited deaf and hard-of-hearing students whose profiles complied with the requirements of my sampling: they had the appropriate hearing loss, and their first language was either American Sign Language or English. Ultimately, eleven students agreed to participate. I interviewed each student two times each about their academic English literacy acquisition experiences within both the NTID English Department and the Liberal Arts Support Department. I completed all of these interviews during the fall quarter term (before Thanksgiving 2004). At the beginning of the winter quarter term, in December 2004, I conducted a focus group with five students from this cohort.

All of the interviews and the focus group were videotaped in a television studio located in my workplace building. This studio was a high-ceilinged room with backdrop draperies for optimal visibility of subjects during filming. Several floodlights with diffusers were used for even illumination, and a single Sony video camera was used for recording these interviews and focus group. The interviews were recorded on premium grade VHS videocassettes, two copies per interview and focus group.

Seating was very important for good data collection because entire torsos needed to be filmed in order to capture all signed communication. For the one-on-one interviews, two upholstered chairs were positioned at 45 degree angles facing each other so that the single video camera could capture both me (the interviewer) and my participant seated, from the knees up. For the focus group, six regular chairs were positioned in a semi-circle so that all participants, including me in the third seat, somewhat in the middle, could see one another.
The participants used a variety of communication modes, including American Sign Language and English. In addition, some participants simply signed and used no voice, whereas others mixed spoken English with sign language. During the individual interviews, I wore a microphone to capture my voice because I signed and spoke during the interviews. During the focus group, I was fortunate to have two certified sign language interpreters present to voice what the participants signed, and again I wore a microphone as I spoke for myself.

The research questions guiding the study were purposely issue oriented (Creswell, 1998, p. 102; Moustakas, 1994, p. 99), targeting the meaning made of the academic English literacy acquisition experience of these students. The interviews and focus groups were guided by topical questions to construct an understanding of the academic English literacy acquisition experience of the students.

**Pre-Interview Component**

I emailed each participant information regarding the date, time, and place of the interview, instructions for attire, and an attached short form with personal information. This form requested such personal data as: name, age, hometown, type of pre-college educational experience, degree of hearing loss, communication preference, and historical and current placement within NTID’s English curriculum. In the email, I also provided participants with an initial question for them to think about: “Tell me about being a student in English courses at RIT.”

**Interview Protocol**

When participants arrived for their interviews at the television studio, I asked them to give me their completed personal information form, and we both signed the informed
consent form. Before we began the interview, I reviewed the personal information with each participant. The first individual interview with each participant lasted for anywhere to a half hour to more than an hour.

Within the same academic quarter, I conducted follow-up interviews with all participants. All interview questions can be found in the Appendix.

All of these interviews were videotaped with a single camera in a television studio on the RIT campus, and the videotape quality was good, rendering the interviews fairly clear. In each interview, both the participant and I are visible from the waist up, to capture our signed conversation.

**FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL**

After their interviews, participants were invited to participate in a group discussion (focus group) for approximately an hour and a half. Five accepted.

The format of the focus group began with introductions of me (the moderator) and all participants and a description of the study itself as well as an explanation of what would take place during the focus group. Then a short videotape of several different writing conferences between deaf students and hearing and deaf tutors was shown to the participants as a form of simulated recall.

After we finished watching the short videotape, discussion began with participant responses to the videotape. Participants were encouraged to share similar experiences, responses to those experiences, and further reflections. After a slow start, the focus group discussion took off and lasted about an hour and a half.
**Videotape Transcription**

The interviews and the focus group discussion were carefully transcribed. I personally transcribed several interviews by watching the interviews on videotape and typing on a laptop what was said during the interviews. My qualifications for accurate transcription of these interviews include a Sign Communication Proficiency Interview (SCPI) rating of Superior. The remaining interviews were given to a certified voice interpreter who holds the following certifications from the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc.: Comprehensive Skills Certificate (CSC), Certificate of Interpretation (CI), and Certificate of Transliteration (CT). This interpreter watched the videotapes and voiced his interpretation onto audiotapes. I ensured participant confidentiality in two ways in this part of the process: I used participant pseudonyms throughout the interviews and focus group, and the interpreter I hired to voice the interviews is bound by the Code of Ethics of the Registry of Interpreters of the Deaf, Inc.

All audiotapes from the interviews and the focus group were given to a professional transcriptionist, who typed up everything.

**Data Analysis**

A feature of qualitative research is that data collection and data analysis occur simultaneously (Merriam, 1988). My analysis of my data was a recursive process in that as I was collecting my data, I was analyzing it, and when I later reviewed the data, I reanalyzed it. My study was directed by this interactive analysis, consistent with Moustakas’ interpretation of Edmund Husserl’s reflective process in transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). As Moustakas explains, “The very act of seeing, just what is there, just as it is, points to further seeing, again and yet again, to the possibility of confirmation.
Husserl (1975) emphasizes that ‘the confirmation-procedures belong to me as transcendental subjectivity (p. 23).’ Confirmation is achieved by repeated looking and viewing while the phenomenon as a whole remains the same (Moustakas, 1994, p. 47).”

Per Creswell (1998), Colaizzi (1978), and Boyatzis (1998), I employed the following procedures in my data analysis:

I reviewed my interview transcripts and focus group transcripts several times to revisit my participants’ discussion of their experiences (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 59). I took a data-driven approach to thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) of the data provided by my participants.

After reviewing the transcripts, my first step was to reduce the raw information that abounded. My method for doing this was to first paraphrase and summarize each comment, observation, and point that arose in the interviews and focus group, creating basically a long list of statements for each interview and the focus group.

Using these long lists, I then extracted significant statements (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 59) from each participant’s interview and from the focus group discussion that show how my participants each had experienced English language learning, the investigated phenomenon. In listing out all of the significant statements, I noted those that repeated or overlapped others.

Next, I input these statements into a spreadsheet that also included each participant’s name. If a participant made a particular statement, I noted that in the spreadsheet and did so for all participants in their interviews and the focus group. Using this spreadsheet, I compared statements across all participants, finding subsamples in which certain statements were prominent (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 87).
Then, from these statements, I identified themes that revealed themselves by their existence across participant experiences (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 86). Colaizzi refers to this part of the process as “formulating meanings,” in which “the phenomenological researcher ... must leap from what his subjects say to what they mean” (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 59). These themes emerged within subsamples of the narratives; not all themes appeared in all narratives, but many narratives shared similar themes. I compiled an exhaustive list of themes and then regrouped the statements under the themes in which they fit.

I wrote textural descriptions of the experience (what happened) within each thematic unit, providing verbatim examples from my participants. These descriptions incorporated details about the context of the experiences described as well as the meanings expressed by the participants of those experiences.

I also developed a list of meanings formulated from my participants’ significant statements. I arrived at these meanings by reading, re-reading, and reflecting upon the significant statements in the original transcripts so as to discern the meanings of the statements within the original context, as written in the textural descriptions. These meanings were closely tied to the original statements, but drew forth deeper implications and interpretations.

Then I described the possible meanings and divergent perspectives offered by participants’ descriptions in contrast or comparison with one another’s, showing how English language learning was experienced. This discussion drew from the list of formulated meanings as well as repeated review of significant statements and interview transcripts.
Finally, I constructed an overall exhaustive description of the meaning of the English language learning experience for each participant and provide the essence (epoche) of that experience for each participant, ultimately providing a composite description at the end of the study.

This study is highly narrative in nature, drawing on my participants’ own words and signs.

In subsequent chapters, I present the findings that emerged from the data in the interview and focus group transcripts. I also discuss these findings in the context of the challenges my participants face in negotiating academic English literacy in college. I interpret the findings and draw conclusions regarding the actual phenomena of the experiences and practices of a group of deaf and hard of-hearing students at a hearing university with a large deaf student population and how these experiences and practices inform us about their perceptions of academic English literacy acquisition.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS:
PRE-COLLEGE LITERACY EXPERIENCES AND PERSONAL BELIEFS
ABOUT LITERACY LEARNING

In the previous chapter, I discussed the research methodology used in this phenomenological study, which focuses on understanding the experience of academic English literacy acquisition for deaf college students.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR COLLEGE
What participants choose to share in these interviews reveals what they consider to be important in their narration of their academic English acquisition experiences. The narratives they share are imbued with value to the participants and are an integral component of their overall experiences. They reveal the meaning the participants make of those experiences, and that meaning should help inform curriculum and policy planning related to education of students like these.

Individual and specific as their personal experiences and reactions were, my participants nonetheless shared information that all together creates a vision, a paradigm that can help us understand what they have gone through and how this has informed their perceptions of their college English experiences.

We have innumerable research studies that tell us all about quantifiable student achievements, such as studies that measure reading skills of deaf students, studies that propose and implement access strategies, studies that compare the achievement of students in mainstream programs with those in deaf institutes, studies that track post-educational attainments of deaf people, and more. All of these studies give us a partial view
of the actual academic English literacy acquisition experience undergone by deaf people. They look at the results rather than the process of this experience. They also take the position of observer and assessor in considering the experience. In short, the meaning that is made of this experience through these various research studies is not necessarily the same as the meaning of the actual participants.

Let us consider a study that measures reading achievement of deaf college students. This study informs us of the test scores earned by these students using standardized instruments and assessing these scores against a scale of some sort, typically establishing baselines based on results from large populations, mostly hearing. The information is interesting and does help explain some reasons behind the status of the students, but it does not tell us what the students actually experienced in the process of living and learning and taking the test to receive the scores they did. We may expect students to attain certain standards, viz., the No Child Left Behind Act, but these expectations do not consider the perceptions of those who are expected to achieve these goals. Without understanding these students’ experiences and perceptions, we are not well prepared to help these students receive the education and achieve the literacy goals we have set for them. Without knowing and understanding the narratives of the participants, we cannot know or understand what tools, strategies, interactions, and other processes will actually help these students.

Rather than try to define my participants’ paradigm myself, I will let the participants share what they know and understand.
OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

This study did not specifically ask participants to narrate their experiences outside of college, but many did bring up their early life and pre-college English acquisition experiences voluntarily. The information revealed by these participants is wide ranging, from discussing their parents’ involvement with them to their attitudes about aspects of learning English. This lack of pattern reflects the variety and vagaries of individual lives and the personal meaning made in each situation.

Most of my participants discussed the experiences and influences in their lives that they perceived to have affected their college English experiences. They brought these up on their own, without any particular line of questioning from me, indicating to me that for them, these were crucial to understanding their later experiences in college.

The influences and experiences that emerged seem to fall in three general categories. Some participants mentioned early intervention experiences, the involvement of their parents, and early communication experiences. Others analyzed their experiences in school, both mainstream and deaf institutions. Still others focused on what did or did not happen for them in school prior to college. For all, these experiences informed their perceptions of college English, generally with regard to how well prepared they felt they were for the challenge of acquiring academic English literacy in college and for attaining literate citizenship.

Then, once they got into college, they began their participation in this aspect of their academic lives, and a new set of themes emerged. My participants shared their reasons and goals for their college English experiences. They brought up the activities they engaged in during their English courses. Some of them analyzed the English system in which they
were participating. Others discussed their teachers, distinguishing the instructors from the English system in which the instructors taught. Still others discussed their peers as a major part of their college English experience. Some talked about their perceptions of the differences between deaf and hearing students in this particular milieu and whether they preferred to interact with hearing students or not and why. As part of this discussion, issues associated with communication, culture, and expectations emerged. Participants also shared their expectations of their college English experiences.

**Mother**

A major influence in most, if not all, students’ lives are parents, and the participants in this study were no exception. Parental involvement plays a crucial role in nearly all cognitive and language development of children, which in turn influences the development of literacy (Marschark et al., 2002; Stewart & Clarke, 2003). Without language, one cannot be literate.

Half of the participants mentioned their early language experiences, most of which involved their parents, particularly their mothers. Kaylee Wallin, the participant who matriculated at RIT at the highest class level of all the participants in this study, stressed that her mother played a critical role in her language development.

[After she learned Kaylee was deaf] My mom talked to everyone—deaf people, doctors, psychologists, everyone that she could think of—she talked to. And she made a decision to keep me talking. I mean my speech is okay but....Yes, I am talking. And she taught me sign language until I became better at it as she was because I was going to go to a deaf school, and I would need to interact with a group of deaf people who wouldn’t want to reject anyone. And she forced me to read, and I started to
love it. I became a bookworm, and I really like to read. And my English really took off and became really better there.

Kaylee’s story reveals her mother as an active participant in promoting her daughter’s literacy development. We see that her mother not only provided Kaylee with speech training so that she could communicate with hearing people, she also learned sign language as a visual means of communicating with her deaf daughter. Furthermore, her mother made sure that Kaylee was placed in environments that supported her development and allowed her to interact with other deaf people who shared her life experiences. In this narrative, Kaylee essentially explains that her early language development, both spoken and signed, helped her access written English and general literacy, which enabled her later to write the kind of placement essay that was expected of highly literate college students.

Another participant whose mother sought out resources to support his language development was John Doe, the participant with the second highest course placement in this group and who attended a school for the deaf. He told a story about how his parents brought in a pre-school teacher to work with him when he was very small.

My mother had a woman from, in Maryland, Kendall School in Washington D.C., who came to my home maybe once or twice a week, from 10 months to 2 or 3 years old. She would teach me signs and try to speak. Exposed me to many things. That is one of the factors that I think I was able to do English well.

In John’s case, his mother’s effort to support her son’s language development included the use of sign language as part of this process, making English more accessible to him. John indicates that his early language experience, combining speech training with a
visual language, exposed him to a variety of concepts that he credits with providing a bridge to becoming skilled with English later.

Moises Jones, who was mainstreamed in high school, experienced similar language development through sign language support as a child. Moises described how his parents specifically used signed exact English with him throughout his childhood, and he credits this with his strong command of English.

The English language is my first language because my parents both looked around and saw that deaf people had weaknesses in English. And, the reason is because their first language was sign language—ASL.

Moises reveals here his parents’ expectation of English as the ultimate goal, with ASL as an unacceptable substitute. His parents’ attitude ratifies the concept of English as the preeminent hegemonic language of the society in which Moises and most deaf people live. Kaylee and John do not describe their mothers as taking this hegemonic stance on their learning to speak, whereas Moises does of his parents, and Moises has internalized this point of view to some degree, as his comments later will show.

Unlike Moises, who accepted the choices his parents made, Zara Vitch, an older student, years and years later expressed resentment and bitterness about her mother’s early choices for her. Zara started her interview with a rundown of all the schools she had attended, emphasizing how she had been placed in an oral deaf education environment at a young age and hated it. She described this experience as the cause of her disconnect with her mother, who expected her daughter to learn how to speak, even though this was very difficult for Zara.
It was about two hours away, and I went to this oral school [at age 2], and I didn’t really understand. Speech reading was hard for me, plus I was separated from my family, and that affected our relationship. I mean, I lost that relationship with my mom.

Zara felt that her mother’s expectations prevented successful communication between the two of them, and this lack of connection also impeded her language and literacy development.

Unlike Zara, Kofu Brown, a participant who had transferred to RIT from another college with a large program for deaf students, spoke positively about his mother’s role in his life. His mother exposed him early to reading and writing and actively encouraged him to do so on his own. Her efforts resulted in Kofu’s feeling empowered and ready for school.

My mother taught me how to read and write. Yes, I learned English before I entered school….My mother tended to give me books, and I would read the book and then write.

For Kofu, English did not feel inaccessible and in fact was a way for him to express himself.

Joseph Goino, the participant with the deaf sister and who was mainstreamed in high school after attending a school for the deaf early in life, and Mark Smith, an older participant who had attended a school for the deaf and completed one degree at RIT, only to return to college after being laid off from his job, also talked about how their mothers were involved with them early in their lives. Mark revealed that his mother had continued to support his college English language learning even when he was a nontraditional student returning to college after working for many years.
The teacher does a good job. Teach me, then I tell my mother what he teaches me, and she explains more clearly to me, to help me understand what the teacher talked about.

In Mark’s case, his mother reinforced what he was learning in school, and this experience seems to have helped him feel somewhat positive about his English experiences, despite the struggles he describes later in this study.

These revelations were made in response to questions asking participants to focus on their English acquisition experiences, and the strong presence of mothers in particular reveals the importance these participants place on their mothers’ influence.

**PRE-COLLEGE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE**

Several participants mentioned their English-learning and general school experiences before arriving at RIT. Overall, they felt under-prepared for their college learning experiences. Jackie Frieda, the participant with the deaf brother and who had been mainstreamed prior to college and who had transferred to RIT from a community college, specifically said, “Yeah, my upbringing and education in English was so-so.” Jackie felt that her early life and school experiences had not been as helpful to her academic preparation as she would have preferred nor as she perceived that literate citizenship required.

Joseph began his interview with the following response to the question: “Tell me about being a student in English courses at RIT,” talking at length about his difficulties learning to write and read in the deaf school that he attended:

I went through all of the different courses at RIT and NTID, and they have been very challenging to me. But you have to understand that I came from a hearing family, but I have an older, deaf sibling – sister. When I was a child and I went to the school
for the deaf, I used ASL in school. But when it came time for writing, sometimes I would make grammatical errors. It didn’t really bother me because I knew that really all of us were in the same boat. It was very challenging. It was hard. The hardest thing was when I would read, and I would come across a vocabulary word that I didn’t know. It would interfere with my comprehension. I had difficulty understanding the point of the story. And so as a result, I really wasn’t real thrilled with reading. I wanted to learn but at the same time, reading was not something that captivated me. Sometimes there were stories that were very interesting, but sometimes there weren’t.

Joseph felt that his later difficulties with his courses in college were a result of his not being properly prepared for successful reading and writing by his deaf school experience, even though he did grow up with ASL. For Joseph, there seems to be a disconnect between his everyday communication in ASL and his mastery of English in school, but he shows a strong interest in being successful in English, reflecting his internalized understanding that this was a goal he “should” attain.

He indicated that he received better education at his mainstream high school than at his deaf school, where he felt he had not been adequately prepared for reading regular texts:

For example, [the texts] might be like eleventh grade or a tenth grade reading level, I should know, but I can’t get through them. When I came into the mainstream school, wow, that helped me a lot! [...] I improved so much in high school because I went to a deaf school where the teaching was limited, and I wasn’t challenged. For
example, one textbook in a public school would take one year, but in a deaf school, three years.

In this example, Joseph reveals the different expectations of the deaf school and the mainstream school: by spending so much more time on a single text, the deaf school shows the soft bigotry of low expectations of its students, whereas the mainstream school is more egalitarian in its expectations that students will attain literate citizenship at a more uniform rate.

Joseph also felt that he received much better support in his mainstream high school, where he attended classes with notetakers and interpreters.

My best teacher was in mainstream school, my first best teacher. That was my junior year, the best teacher. He was dependable, he would sit and discuss with me, happy to help no matter what, explained why it was wrong, gave me hints, and found a way for me to pass by giving me hints. He was like that with all students. But sometimes he helped me more, why? Because I'm deaf, and he knew I was frustrated. I took a test on the computer to find out my English level. Fourth grade when I was a sophomore. I felt embarrassed, yes, but my junior year, he told me not to worry. I understand your first language is ASL, second language is English. I was so relieved. He told me, I will work on it with you. He was so dependable, and I improved a lot through that high school teacher.

In Joseph’s mainstream school situation, he was the only deaf student and consequently was able to receive such intensive support. Through this support, the mainstream school signaled both that Joseph was not academically prepared at the same time the school was willing to invest in bringing him “up to speed.”
Mike Massa, the participant who entered RIT at the lowest course placement level of all the participants, also remarked on his pre-college experience and feeling unprepared for college writing:

My first courses and I was overwhelmed. I didn't know how to write an essay. I had never written a paper before. Yes, because in my high school there wasn’t a lot of writing or where you discuss things.

Mike was mainstreamed and seems to have fallen through the cracks in terms of getting the support he needed, unlike Joseph, who received extensive support. Mike’s shock at realizing his lack of preparation in his first college English course is palpable, but it did provide him with the motivation to improve his skills, as he tells us later in this study.

Zara talked about her English learning experience at her deaf high school, which involved more writing than Mike experienced at his school.

All I remember of English, well, they really didn’t emphasize English, but we did write. I remember writing every day. They emphasized writing a lot. And then I graduated in 1991, and that was it. I left school. I wasn’t interested in going to college at that time. I wasn’t interested in college for my future. And, at that time I wanted to work with animals, being a veterinarian technician or a veterinarian assistant. Then ten years later I found out and realized that maybe college was important. It was a lot more important than it used to be, so I moved here and entered NTID.

In this anecdote, Zara tells us that even though writing was practiced in her last high school, she apparently did not make the connection between the importance of writing and her career options until later in life. One possible reason for Zara’s disconnect is her
strong dislike of English, which she elaborates on with great emphasis later in this study, which motivated her to disregard it until she was forced to deal with it as part of the college experience.

**PERSONAL ATTITUDE**

The outlook and attitude of these participants informed their perceptions of their English learning experiences in a variety of ways. Some were negative, easily frustrated, like Zara, and a few were highly motivated.

As Zara remarked in the school section, her attitude toward school before college was not highly motivated or particularly positive. John Doe’s perspective was a little different:

Really, to be honest with you, I’m not very fond of English even though I’m good at English. I’m not motivated. I just take what I am required to do.

For John, English is merely a means to an end. Mark also said he did not care about English. “I don’t like to sit, I like to be active. I do sports a lot, do things, not sit and read, I’m not motivated.” Mark elaborated on this point in his second interview:

It’s hard to understand vocabulary, key words for that. One word can have many meanings, like another word. I never use that word, but I use that one a lot, so I use that one. I repeat, repeat, repeat. They encourage me to use other words so I have many many words, more vocabulary. But I’m not interested in that.

For Mark, apparently the effort required of him to expand his vocabulary was not worthwhile in the grand scheme of his life, where he perceived he didn’t need the high level of English promoted in college.
Another participant who referred to the perception of being expected to achieve a higher skill level in English at RIT was Zara, who described her English learning experience as very difficult:

Hard! It has always been hard! It is one of my big struggles. I am pretty good at communication and writing and short-stories, but at the level that RIT expects, it makes me nervous, of course. I mean, I am not going to give up. I am going to stick with it. And I’ll get through it. And I’ll do well. I will succeed, but I’ll never be as proficient as the hearing students here.

Even as Zara reveals how challenged she felt, she also reveals a determination to keep working to improve at the same time she does not expect to achieve a “hearing” standard of English competency. This internal conflict arises with other participants, who talk about their perception that to succeed and attain literate citizenship, they must achieve a “hearing” standard of English competency even in the face of circumstances and factors beyond their control that typically inhibit their efforts. Zara’s comment that she will succeed indicates that she has decided there is another way to measure success than attaining the same proficiency as hearing students.

Joseph, at the beginning of his first interview, when asked about his perception of the writing course he was enrolled in at that time (Written Communication I), said:

Challenging. I think I will fail. I don’t want to fail it because it takes a lot of writing. I know that I need to improve, and I’ll have to take the whole thing all over again if I don’t. It really makes me kind of feel bored that I have to do this.
He seems to assume he would not pass because he found the course so challenging, indicating to him that his skills were inadequate for moving on to the next level of this progression in the academic English system.

He also shows a sign of what could be considered despair about this situation. Of his high school experience, he also expressed frustration as well his perception that he needed to mask that frustration in order to avoid problems:

Sometimes it is really frustrating, but I don’t want to show that frustration because if I show the frustration to the teacher, I know that the teacher will think that I have an attitude. So, I want the teacher to make sure to know that I want to learn.

In this comment, Joseph reveals an apparent conflict between his feelings and what he believes he can safely show his teachers, who “control” his destiny in school.

Unlike Joseph, Kaylee Wallin did not feel challenged by her college English courses, which were specifically designed for deaf students. She said, “I wanted to be challenged, and that is one of the reasons that I came to college. And with Writing and Lit I and II, I didn’t feel that challenge, so I wanted to take something new.” For Kaylee, the courses she took did not meet the standard she expected to find, reflecting her internalized literate citizenship.

Moises Jones, who also felt confident about his English skills, but was placed at a lower level English course than he felt his skills warranted, talked about how this initial placement demoralized him and how his motivation dramatically improved when he moved up into the higher level writing courses and felt challenged in a positive way:

I wasn’t motivated at all in Reading and Writing IV, to be honest with you. Yes. Because I looked at that class, and it was really easy because it was high school stuff.
I don’t mean to insult anyone. When I got into Written Communication I and II, I really liked that because it was a whole new ball game. It was challenging for me. And I was able to make progress, and it was easy for me to learn and keep myself participating. Are you with me? Yes, it was new things related to the English language that I never knew before. So I was motivated to learn those.

Moises shows a dichotomy in his perception of the courses designed for deaf students, clearly demarcating a line between the ones he perceived as remedial and the ones he perceived as bringing him even closer to his goal of completing his liberal arts requirements.

Mike Massa, on the other hand, throughout his interviews demonstrated a high degree of internal motivation about learning English even though he began at the most remedial level of all the participants. He talked about seeking out teachers for extra help and remarked that this support gave him confidence:

And you could build a lot of confidence too. Sometimes my problem was just not having enough confidence and needed to boost it.... If you don’t feel confident, you are not going to do well on your papers because sometimes, well, what happened in the past was I wasn’t feeling confident, and I would try to write one of those in-class tests, and I would really mess up. And then the next time I would be feeling confident, and I could do it. I would look at the test, and everything would just run smoothly. So, I think that confidence can be key.

Mike also discussed his personal motivation, “I don’t know where that motivation comes from. But even growing up, I was always motivated. So I went to school, and I hated missing class. I never missed class for a long, long time. And I loved learning. I just love it.”
Like Mike, but in specific terms, Kofu Brown mentioned passion in his discussion of his attitude about English learning:

We have passion. Maybe the teachers don’t recognize my passion. And if they listen to students’ concerns that would…. If they don’t listen to students’ concerns, that would cause the students to lose motivation. It happened to me, and that is why my grades looked bad. So now I have got to really work and fight to clean up my grades this quarter.

Kofu seems to combine passion with motivation in his outlook on his ability to succeed in the academic English system. Roxanne Flores also talked about her own interest and motivation as well as other students’, remarking on how they generally were high, but would ebb and flow from time to time, depending on circumstances and other people.

It depends because I have the ability to really enjoy English. I mean some people just can’t stand it. And that makes it even harder for them. But most of the time I am really eager to do a lot of writing. And sometimes I am not interested and it is hard to stay up for that. I kind of lose my motivation. But most of the time I am pretty motivated to do well in English courses. Plus, it depends on the environment too because if everyone is kind of up about it, that is great. And if other folks are down, that kind of pulls me down too. …when you lose your motivation it feels like ugh…. And you don’t want to do the analysis or to try. Sometimes you try, and you are just not up for it, but if you are motivated, then it is just, you know, then you are ready to put in the work and do the reading and think about things and write. And everything that you have learned about reading and writing up until then can be applied to the tasks that you need to do right then; you know, papers or reading or whatever it is.
In this comment, Roxanne touches on an area that Kofu mentions: that of keeping the faith while struggling through a system that inherently feels disadvantaging.

**EXPECTATIONS**

The expectations of participants regarding their English acquisition experiences also varied widely. Grades assigned during and at the end of courses were interpreted by students to be reflections of their skill levels, an understanding formed from many years of traditional schooling. The concept, however, that a student could improve considerably throughout a quarter and still not pass a course was not one that was discussed by my participants. This concept is one that faculty members perceive, but students seem not to.

Joseph, who had spent several quarters in college, expected that his grades would improve over time at RIT, indicating improved English skills, but this apparently did not happen:

- I thought that I would improve and start getting B's in English. But I keep getting C's in English no matter what I do. Everything that I write, I just get C's on it. I thought that I would be improving. But I don't seem to improve. Like in Written Communication I, I took that course with Keenan. And Keenan said that I was improving. I thought, okay, I am improving. Then I went on to the next course, and my papers are just all covered in red! I was hoping that I would get 80 or above, you know? No, I keep getting D's. And we would have homework, and I would answer the question, and I'll get the homework. That is really easy for me. And I kind of get to the structure and grammar, and I can't do it. Well, I mean that I don't do it successfully. I mean, I guess that I can do it, but I don't succeed at the level that I want to.... Like sometimes I can't really judge my own work. You know, with my
attitude, if someone says what’s wrong with your attitude, I can notice that I have
done something wrong and apologize. But with English, I can’t really judge my own
work.

In this observation, Joseph reveals his perception that by earning the same grades in
each course, his skills had not improved when in fact they probably had, slowly and
perhaps imperceptibly, over time as reflected by the fact that he did continue to progress
through the curriculum. In other words, his grades indicated the level of readiness his
skills demonstrated for the next course, but this was not his interpretation of his own
grades, which he used to monitor his progress. He also seems to discount his ability to do
certain tasks in academic English because of his perception that he cannot do them with a
degree of success he considers to be acceptable. He admits to feeling able to adjust his
attitude, but not his ability with academic English, reflecting an internalized lack of
confidence.

Like Joseph, Mark expected to improve over time. During his second interview, he
talked about his perception that he had not really improved his English skills from his first
time through college to his second stint, which was when he participated in this study:
The same experience with other people in the past and the present. I feel they are
the same, to improve English. I don't see much difference when I look at the two.
Also, myself, I see the same thing as in the past, I have problems with English. Not
much different. Nothing improved for me. I tried to do my best.... Yes, always tough
for me.

Mark’s experience and perception seem similar to Joseph’s, where both indicated
that the grades they earned did not reflect the effort or emotion they put into their
academic English experiences. They seemed to be resigned to this circumstance. Zara, however, took a more aggressive and defensive approach in explaining her expectations of improving her English:

I don't like it when a person destroys my words and won't let us be comfortable writing English the way that we write English, in our own style, our own words. I mean, individuals grow up and based upon what they have learned and seen and the accumulation of their life experience. I mean, I understand that RIT has a formulaic way of writing, but I am not sure that all have to always follow that. Put that aside, and there should be another, well, people should be able to write with a degree of comfort without thinking that they are going to be criticized too much. And I think that people should respect deaf people and deaf culture and realize that we are working in a second language; that we are second language users.

In this remark, Zara reveals an expectation of a different standard of English for deaf people. She seems to feel that if deaf people cannot acquire English the same way hearing people do, they should not be measured by the same standards.

ENGLISH IS IMPORTANT

My participants revealed a number of perceptions related to English and how success in English correlates with success in college. The prevailing perception is that English is important. Even though many participants expressed varying degrees of frustration and anger about struggling with the English language and their English courses, none of them ever denied the accepted wisdom that English is important to success in life and the hearing world.
One of the main reasons that English was considered to be so important was to meet programmatic and degree requirements in college. In other words, one could not earn a college degree without passing English requirements. Mike Massa said:

My first year here in 1998, one of my friends was asking me about English, and we were talking about it, and it wasn’t until winter quarter, the end of winter quarter, when my friend said why are you talking about English every night? I told him, well I need that. I need that skill for my associate’s degree and my baccalaureate degree. If I don’t pay attention to English, I am not going to be able to get my degrees.

Mike shows how he has internalized the perception that success in academic English plays a significant in achieving his long-range goals. Mark Smith also talked about the fact that English skills were a requirement for graduating from college

When I was planning to enter school, I didn’t want to take English because I had already taken it in high school, but I was required to take English to pass the major course requirements for a degree.

In his comment, Mark indicates that he felt he had taken enough English for his own purposes, but he was resigned to the requirement for academic English in college. Joseph Goino pointed out that the value of his English courses became more important for the more advanced degrees, such as the bachelor’s degree relative to the associate’s degree. In his explanation, his reference to “RIT” indicates that bachelor’s degrees are awarded in the other colleges of RIT.

The valuable part of it is that I am going to get a degree. That is what is important, and I want to transfer to RIT. And I know that RIT requires an advanced level of understanding in English.
The diligent Mike Massa talked about his reasons for working so hard in his English classes:

I know that writing is very important for everyone, and I know that I need to do well in English because everyone needs to because it is regularly required in the future on the job. I want to study, well, I am studying Business Administration at RIT right now, and it demands a lot of writing and reading and feedback with people and interacting and communication. If I didn't have those skills, I won't be able to get a job in the future working with people. So I have high expectations for practicing a lot.

Here Mike explains both pragmatic and personal justification for focusing so much on an area that requires so much work from him.

After commenting that he personally wasn't motivated to study English in college, John Doe made the distinction between taking English courses in college and using English every day.

Yeah, I would give English a chance. Yeah, I'm not going to close it away. It's our language, a part of our daily life. We need to use it.

Like Mike, John reveals a pragmatic perspective on the utility and value of English in the long run which seems to give him the fortitude to continue working with academic English.

Zara Vitch tied several of these threads together when she elaborated at length on the role of English in the “real world:”

Well, my major requires that I take English. That’s the point. English isn’t my favorite.... Also, I am eager to improve because when I first got here to college, it hit
me that I needed to know English. Before that, I didn’t really care about English at all. I didn’t understand why English was important and reading. And I hated reading. Now that I have entered college, I understand that English is important for my future. So, putting aside that it is a requirement and even after I finish school and graduate, I am still going to want to improve and study books, and that will be important for me. Well, it is how the world communicates – through reading. You know, on the job in the future, it is going to be important. And I think that it levels out the playing field for deaf and hearing people, and communication is important. I mean, I’ll never be as good in English in some ways, but communication is important and useful in pagers and e-mail and for negotiation and communication and everything, using the telephone and everything. That is all English-based.

Again we see a shared perception that skill with English can only help with personal advancement in the world. This mantra is repeated by several participants at various times in their interviews, indicating that they have internalized this social message. Roxanne Flores, who has a deaf sister, reinforced this message to her sister:

I mean she was militant about ASL being her language, and that was it. So you know, I told her there is a rationale for learning English. You need to know English for all kinds of reasons. It is just different. It doesn’t mean that you are being discriminated against.

Moises Jones took this concept a little further, explaining why ASL is not sufficient for deaf people if they expect to succeed in the “real world:”
And they can develop easily when they get older if they learn ASL as their second language. But, that is not appropriate for standard communication with hearing people or for writing.

Mark Smith touched on this issue a little, indicating his preference for sign language as his communicative means:

I made conversations with hearing people, but I didn’t speak in complete English sentences, just summaries, short phrases to get them to understand what I was talking about. When I talked in English, they didn’t understand what I was talking about because my grammar wasn’t in the right order. So that’s why I hate English. My friend who worked with me, I taught her sign language, I talked to her, and she would speak sentences to hearing people so they would understand what I was talking about.

For Mark, ASL, a visual language, ended up being his avenue for communicating in situations where his English was not understood by other people. When he encountered communicative difficulties using English, he also experienced frustration and unhappiness, almost driving home the subliminal message that English is necessary for successful communication.

These pre-college literacy learning experiences influenced my informants in both positive and negative ways, informing their subsequent personal attitudes and expectations for their achievement in college English courses and providing the background for their persistence in working within the often difficult constraints of academic English. In the next section, my informants discuss what took place in their college English courses.
ACTIVITIES IN ENGLISH COURSES

When my participants were specifically asked to describe their English learning experiences, their responses were not particularly detailed. The questions were: Can you describe your academic English learning experience in these courses? Tell me what your classes, teachers, and tutoring experiences were like. What were the activities in these situations? How did you feel about them? My participants spoke in generalities in their responses to these questions.

However, when they were asked, “What aspects of learning English do you dislike?” they responded in much greater detail and narrated not only what took place in their English courses, but also their responses to these events and experiences. Their responses interwove participants’ feelings and emotions with their actual activities. The responses to this question were highly varied, addressing aspects as large as writing in general to those as small as annotation. The aspects raised included writing and reading in significant detail, most of it negative, as well as vocabulary, teachers, group discussions, and sign language, which were discussed in positive terms.

WRITING

In these students’ college English courses, they were expected to write, often at length and frequently. The activity of writing in college raised a variety of issues for participants. Most participants expressed challenges of one kind or another with writing, whether rooted in personal perception or actual experience. For example, Mark Smith remarked that:

Writing! Writing, for what? If I write a letter, I’m not really expressing my feelings. If I’m talking, I express my feelings with facial expressions. Expressions in a letter,
no. Writing to a boss, I can with help, friends or my mother, how to start it, thank you for things that happened. Myself write? I don’t. That’s why I’m not good, how to start writing a letter is hard, but after I start, I can do it myself. I have a problem with starting. I sit at the computer and think, how do I say? I know how to say in sign, but in English? I can’t do anything, that’s the problem.

Here Mark is expressing a disconnect that he feels between what he wishes to communicate and express and the process of using writing to achieve that goal. He feels that writing is inadequate for his communicative and expressive needs, but he recognizes that school and work require written communication.

This theme of disconnection from writing and the process of writing is echoed by other participants. Mike Massa remarked that he enjoyed writing about himself, using his own experience in his writing.

Writing about myself. For example, sometimes teachers want to see our writing skills, and they will ask students just to write about themselves. And I thought sure. So, I went home and wrote and explained a bit about NTID and my previous school experience and my friends. And I would start writing and gave it to the teacher. The teacher thought boy, that’s not bad. They said that everything was in good structure and in good order. And if I had something on my mind, you know that I self-generate, I can write it well. If I try to summarize a story, that’s tough. I mean, it comes out okay. It doesn’t really flow. If I write things that I really know well, it comes out more organized. And I am not missing the main ideas. So, sometimes that makes me look stupid. It takes practice and it depends on the situation. I don’t like reading and summarizing articles. That takes practice.
For Mike, writing from personal experience was much less challenging than the
typical college English writing assignment, such as a summary of an article. In Mike’s mind,
he could organize the concepts of his personal experience clearly and then explain them. In
this aspect, he felt confident and literate. However, reading a text and then writing a
summary of it required a different skill set for Mike, one that he struggled with and one that
made him feel that he had not succeeded (“sometimes that makes me look stupid”) in
academic English.

Kofu Brown also liked writing from personal experience and choosing his own
topics:

I don’t like it when the teacher tells you what to write. Yeah, because I don’t know
what they expect and when you don’t know what they expect it really blocks your
writing. You start to write something and go oh, no, maybe that is not what the
teacher wants. And you keep starting over and over again. Like for example, one
teacher asked us to write the meaning of the word, and I thought that’s not what I
want. So I kind of forced myself to just write what the teacher wants to hear and not
what I want to write. And that is very different. I like to write because, well, I like to
write what I want to write. And, with the teacher, sometimes they will assign a
project for us to write, and I don’t really enjoy that. It makes me block. So, I would
rather have something that applies to my experience.

Kofu echoes Mike’s experience of an uncertainty about what and how to write in
response to assignments as well as a strong preference for starting his writing from
personal experience. Like Mike, Kofu felt awkward about attempting to write for another
person or another purpose than for himself, indicating his discomfort with stepping into
this academic English arena and the rules and expectations therein. He also indicates a reluctant deference to his teachers (“So I kind of forced myself to just write what the teacher wants to hear and not what I want to write.”), reflecting the power of the academic English system over the student.

Like Kofu, Zara Vitch disliked being assigned writing topics because she felt confused and unclear about how to write and what the teacher expected:

It was like the teacher would just throw out a topic, and we had to start writing, and I was lost. It seemed like the teacher had expectations of the students as a group, but all of the students had their own individual differences. I would get my paper back, and it would be all marked up, and that didn’t feel good.

Zara’s comment reveals a collision of teacher expectations with individual ability, indicating that she perceived her marked-up paper as a kind of rejection of her personal experience.

Another stressful aspect of writing in English class for some participants was writing in-class essays. Mike Massa talked at length about the challenge of writing essays in a single class period:

Because if you read stories in class, you can’t prepare. Like outside you can read it until you understand what it is about, practice, and then write the essay. But in class, the teachers pass out a story, and you only get to read it once or twice, and then you have to go ahead and immediately write an essay, and there is no one to help you with the grammar because it is a test. So I write it the best I can and try to make everything fit and turn it in. It is really hard. It is tough. I remember that experience. I would get so nervous, and I would try to calm down and focus on the
writing and make sure that I had the grammar, and it was well organized, and I didn’t have my paragraphs out of order.

Mike explains that the limited time put him at a disadvantage in terms of his need for enough time to read and understand the text at hand as well as to review his grammar, both of which are common challenges for many deaf people. He also reveals how stressful this situation was for him (“I would try to calm down”).

Another participant who mentioned the negative impact of limited time on her ability to do well in English classes was Sami Bradley, who said, “Plus there were serious time limitations. I never had enough time. We would have, during the week you would have to focus on an article. There wasn’t time to go to tutoring and they said well, that is too bad if there is not enough time to go to tutoring. You are going to have to do the work on your own then.”

The subtext of Sami’s comment is that she did not feel confident doing the work on her own and relied on assistance from others, which increased the time she needed to get the work done. For Sami, the work was challenging enough, and being expected to complete it within a specific timeframe while relying on assistance from others simply compounded the pressure for her.

Another participant who struggled with the expectations of academic writing was Joseph, who generally disliked writing, especially academic essays, preferring to use sign language:

What I don’t like is a lot of writing, a lot of essays. It takes a lot of time, a lot of research, I have to make connections, I have to figure out the organization, I just don’t know what I’m doing it for. If I could do my type of analysis, fine, but I’m
assigned something else that I don’t like. Sometimes I’d rather sign and have someone else write it down for me, easier. That helps a lot because if I write it down, someone else might misunderstand it, and I have to fix it and reorganize it.

For Joseph, academic English had no immediately personal utility (“I just don’t know what I’m doing it for”), and he offers a strategy that he perceives as useful for helping him to meet the assignment requirements, that of first signing out his concepts and having another person transcribe them.

Like Joseph, Zara Vitch preferred ASL, and she expressed the strongest negative feelings of all the participants about English, particularly regarding the act of writing for class:

My experience with English, writing and reading and explaining what a story is about, the main ideas of the story, writing feels worse for me. It is more of a struggle. It seems like it is hard to keep up your esteem because I would write a paper, turn it into the teacher, and when I got it back, the entire paper would be covered with corrections and comments. It was like the teacher destroyed my English words, my own words that I used! It was hard for me to understand because, I mean, I look at people signing in ASL, and signers have their own individual styles. And I thought that it should be similar for English, that people have their own individual style of writing and their own idiosyncrasies. But it is like the teacher wanted us to all write exactly the same or follow some standard way of writing. And, really, that was the most frustrating part for me as a deaf person because I never found the right answer. Like with math, you solve the problem, and you find the one right answer. But, with English, I never found a right answer. It was
always kind of vague or ambiguous. I would write something, and they would change my words or my sentences and syntax, and it was all messed up! Well, let me back up. If I signed something, I translated, that might help because it is so visual because my first language is ASL and my second language is English. And writing doesn’t lend itself to that same visual representation.

Here Zara clearly says that the expectation of teachers that students will write standard English following standard essay conventions was frustrating and confusing for her (“that was the most frustrating part for me as a deaf person because I never found the right answer”), and she particularly objected to her teachers’ correction of her work, which she perceived as demoralizing. Her comment, “It was like the teacher destroyed my English words, my own words that I used!” indicates that she felt her efforts and work were not respected.

**Reading**

Extensive reading is typical in college English courses, even remedial English classes, and reading is an area that challenges deaf people in general. Not only is the act of reading difficult, the material assigned in college courses are commonly more challenging than what most deaf students are accustomed to. Several students talked about the influence and difficulty of reading in their English courses. Mark Smith said:

I hate reading. It makes me fall asleep because I don’t have a big picture of what’s going to happen. A short story I can understand clearly. Short stuff like sports. I like to read the sports section. It’s short, I can read it, and I understand it. Short and simple. But a novel, a long story, long and exaggerated, I don’t like that. Watching a movie is fine because it’s active. Not reading. Different people’s philosophies. My
philosophy, I don’t like. My mother has rows and rows of books. She loves to read John Grisham, many many things, but I just….It’s just sentence, sentence, no pictures. If there were pictures, I could understand what the story is about. Just words, words, not pictures much. On a novel, there’s a picture on the hard cover front, then you open it and read the story. It’s not really clear to me. I’d read it, not understand it, then the teacher would explain clearly so that I could understand what the story was about.

For Mark, reading was cognitively challenging and unsatisfying (“It’s just sentence, sentence, no pictures.”), preventing him from staying motivated enough to continue practicing to read and therefore to improve. Reading alone was not successful for Mark, who relied on someone else explaining the text for him to be able to understand it. Mark was not alone in experiencing an inability to connect to the deeper cognitive activity of successful reading. Another participant who remarked on visual issues was Sami Bradley:

And I tend to, well, I am taking a course right now, this quarter, and the textbook has a lot of pictures in it. So, what I will do is I'll glance at all of the pictures first and then go back and read the chapter and as I am reading, I can relate what I am reading to the pictures in the text. Oh, pictures help me a lot. And it is interesting when I meet one-on-one with friends, I have friends who their entire career here were mainstreamed. They went through classes in the mainstream here at RIT. They told me that they took their English courses mainstreamed. They had trouble following because it was just a series of words. It was frustrating because it was just a string of words, and they missed having pictures and visuals. I thought, man, their entire career was mainstreamed, but they had that same experience. I am not the
only one who is strongly visual. Even students in the mainstream have internalized language, have representations that are visual. And that signing helps them. That is why I think BI-BI programs, bilingual-bicultural programs can be so important. They incorporate a lot of visual activities, translating ASL to English and English to ASL and that activity is as important as the visual language.

Like Mark, Sami relied on pictures and ASL to help her visualize the text (“I am not the only one who is strongly visual.”). Joseph’s view of reading was a little different. He talked more about how his limited vocabulary made his reading comprehension somewhat challenging, and the extra effort required for him to read motivated him simply to get by in order to complete his assignments:

Reading is fine, but that much reading, I’m just reading to get the answer. Same with vocabulary, get it done, good enough, still get a good grade. I’m doing the work to finish it, not to learn or get the big picture.

The hardest thing was when I would read and I would come across a vocabulary word that I didn’t know. It would interfere with my comprehension. I had difficulty understanding the point of the story. And so as a result, I really wasn’t real thrilled with reading. I wanted to learn, but at the same time, reading was not something that captivated me. Sometimes there were stories that were very interesting, but sometimes there weren’t.

Sami Bradley experienced a similar challenge in comprehending new vocabulary:

Well, I read it, and I use a dictionary and go back and forth from the article to looking up words or look them up on the internet. And it is a lot of work, but that helps me. Or, I’ll meet a friend who is knowledgeable about politics or science or
whatever topic and talk about it and look at the article, maybe even paragraph by paragraph, talk it over, and that way I’ll get this mental construct of what it is about. For both Sami and Joseph, unfamiliar vocabulary slowed down their reading and made the process more difficult. Sami seemed more willing to find solutions to that challenge, through using other resources or by talking with another person.

Sami also talked about how a lack of background knowledge created challenges in both writing and reading for her, making assignments based on personal experience much easier for her than assignments based on external information:

In my opinion, students can do creative writing and then get feedback on what they have written instead of the teacher imposing writing assignments on them. That is my opinion. I mean, sometimes the teacher wants to give us something for a challenge. That’s fine. Or select the articles for the group and they can be motivating. It depends. Like from my experience taking NTID courses, we were assigned basic articles to write like something related to human experience or deaf things. But, in RIT classes, they want us to write about politics or science with all of this jargon, and they give us articles to read, and I didn’t mind reading the English and I would get through them, but it was a challenge. Often I would struggle because politics isn’t something that I am aware of. I just don’t have enough exposure to it. My life experience took me on a different path so I don’t have background knowledge in politics. I can understand it communicating one-on-one and talking about it. But reading and writing articles about it, they have some rules set up what they expect us to do to summarize and outline the article, and that is a bit different; a different challenge.
In this comment, Sami references the “rules” of academic English as well as the expectation in college that she be either already familiar with the subject or able to read well enough to become familiar with it and then to write about it, conforming to academic English conventions.

**POSITIVE RESPONSES**

Despite the negative overtones of the narratives related to writing and reading earlier in this chapter, my participants did enjoy aspects of their English experiences at RIT, but as usual, their responses ranged the gamut.

**VOCABULARY**

An integral aspect of reading is vocabulary development, particularly in college English, where subjects and concepts also are typically much more broad ranging than students have been exposed to in high school. Joseph enjoyed learning and understanding the Latin roots of English words:

Because the root helped me to really assume what the meaning was, to figure out the meaning. I would study the vocabulary, and on the day of the test, I’d get a low grade because I didn’t know the roots. The teacher didn’t explain very clearly. But it was a good experience. But, sometimes we would talk about the vocabulary and it wasn’t explained very clearly. And then we would have to go to the next item. So I would ask the teacher to look at the root of the word. Philia, like pedophilia, we wouldn’t get the first part of the word. We’d just move to the next word. But maybe a word has two roots.

Well, for example, the teacher tells me something, and I don’t understand it. Or, it goes over my head. For example, maybe they might explain it really clearly, and I
understand it perfectly. And I understand their point, but I don’t fully absorb it. OK, phobia means fear. What’s the point? Where else can that appear? Fear of heights, fear of water, fear of food, fear of [unclear], fear of people, the teacher should list all those to help explain, but they didn’t. Bi means two, geo means earth something, all the roots, but not the full words. Should use the first root, the middle root, and the last root.

In this narrative, Joseph liked the utility and logic of Latin roots as a vocabulary development strategy, and he commented that he wished his instructor would take the time to explain all the possible roots in a given word. He felt that knowing the meaning of each root in a word would help him expand his vocabulary further (“OK, phobia means fear. What’s the point? Where else can that appear?”).

Like Joseph, John Doe viewed vocabulary development as a useful undertaking with clear benefits:

I just like to learn a new word, a different word that I’m willing to learn how to spell and what it means. Another reason why I like vocabulary is a unique word that will help me look intelligent. For example, if I applied for a job and on my resume, when the boss looks over the resume, and I know to have a good impression is the keyword here. If my resume had an intelligent phrase compared to having a very limited choice of words. I know I should not worry about what other people think, but that is my reason, not the only reason, but I do happen to like vocabulary.

For John, a strong vocabulary was not only a useful tool, it also served as a marker of his status as a proficient user of English, which he perceived to be helpful in future efforts to gain employment.
**DIFFERENT TEACHERS**

Mike Massa enjoyed the variety of classes and teachers he experienced at RIT and the idea that he could take different courses with different teachers. Mike explained:

> Almost all of the English classes motivated me. Yes, because of the different teacher’s style. Some wanted you to write details, in-depth about details. Other teachers wanted you to be more superficial maybe to get the big picture. And that was fine. So, you would write that but each of them had a different way of writing, a different style. And I had no favorite. All of them motivated me. There was Analysis and Writing and Reading, and they were fun. But it was a lot of work and a lot of practice.

Mike perceived the exposure to different teaching expectations as an opportunity to expand his learning experiences and his skills, all in the name of improving his English.

**GROUP DISCUSSIONS**

Group discussion and interactions with classmates both were important to a number of participants, who valued the collaborative learning opportunities in these situations. Many participants commented that they valued group interactions, feeling more involved in the course than if the course were strictly lecture format. Mark Smith said:

> Yes, but reading by myself didn’t help me. I have to communicate with other people, talking with people helps me understand each other more than alone. Yes, the group helps each other understand the story.

Zara Vitch particularly appreciated the group discussions:

> Analysis of Lit and Themes and Symbols was better because we would all have group discussions and brainstorming, and we could sign what we were talking
about, and that really helped me. I could see what the point of the book was about. I liked that. I really liked the group discussions that led to writing because we could write based on what we had discussed in class rather than just working individually and independently without the benefit of group discussion. It wasn’t the same at all. I was a lot more lost without the group discussion. That discussion helped.

Working with others helped Zara connect with the assigned material as well as with other students, enabling her to feel as if she made progress in school (“I was a lot more lost without the group discussion.”) and as if school was worthwhile.

Sami also appreciated group discussions:

In general I have noticed that when students are in a group and the teacher gives them an article to read, they start off pretty motivated, and then the teacher can lead a discussion in sign language, and the students all get to talk about it, and the teacher can explain more in-depth. And it does include English skills. You can learn English from that discussion.

Sami explicitly credited group learning as a language and discourse learning strategy (“You can learn English from that discussion.”) that benefited both students and teachers. Sami noted that deaf teachers tended to use group discussions as part of the classroom experience, and she felt this helped her learn:

With a deaf teacher, often they will lead discussions, and that is kind of the same sort of thing, and it helps with the homework. When you need to work on the homework later, it is really helpful. Other teachers just write English on the board or lecture in straight English, spoon-feed the students, and it is more of a challenge and a struggle, at least from my perspective.
According to Sami, the deaf teachers’ group discussion teaching strategy enabled students to engage with the material and later work independently and successfully. For Sami, the traditional lecture format, particularly delivered in “straight English,” was not a good strategy for helping her to learn the material and concepts. Instead of enabling her to form her own connections, the lectures seemed to have told her what she needed to know, which she seems to have later not internalized successfully.

SIGN LANGUAGE IN THE CLASSROOM

Communication in the classroom is an essential aspect of learning in school, and for deaf students, sign language is particularly important. Several participants commented that they valued the ability to communicate in their English courses through sign language. Mike Massa said:

I thank God for … the teachers too because the teachers could sign, and I would go to their office for office hours and get some ideas and would be ready to write the paper.

Jackie Frieda much preferred her college educational experience over what she experienced before arriving in college:

Because I was able to get the teachers who were able to sign and communicate. When I was growing up, I didn’t have appropriate interpreting education for the deaf. They just assume “oh she understands (wave off), she understands.” The reason why I understood was while I was growing up, I lipread and I can talk. I communicated with my family and everything. I listened based on the sound and phrases, ok this is the way it’s supposed to be. This is the way it’s supposed to be. Fine, sentence, sentence, sentence. But I never knew it was supposed to follow a
correct English grammar, where verb comes after the noun. I never learned that until I got to RIT.

The subtext of Jackie’s comment is that she perceived her RIT college English experience as being more complete and thorough in terms of exposing her to aspects of academic English, including grammar, that she had been unaware of previously.

This section has reviewed activities and experiences in their college English courses discussed by my participants. The next section will address obstacles and challenges that my participants perceived to be hindrances to their success in academic English at this specific university.

PERCEPTIONS OF HOW THE ACADEMIC ENGLISH SYSTEM LIMITS DEAF STUDENTS

In this study, the “academic English system” refers to the entire microcosm of English courses, instructors, support services, and expectations that my participants had to navigate in their careers at college. Passing through this system seems to confer a kind of literate citizenship on the students who succeed, enabling them to take other liberal arts courses that they had previously been blocked from taking. However, getting through the system is reported to be difficult and frustrating.

Deaf students take English courses at RIT for a number of reasons, some of them related to personal growth and improvement, others related to external influences. Nearly all deaf students take the courses in order to meet the requirements of their degree programs. A subset of these students also focuses on the completion of the courses for the
purpose of transferring out of an associate degree program into a baccalaureate degree program at RIT.

Many students arrive at RIT and are placed in developmental or remedial English courses because of their skills at entry. Their initial English course placement does not typically reflect their degree aspirations, however, and consequently this disconnect sometimes creates discontent on the part of the students. Their disappointment at finding themselves at a course level that requires them to complete more English courses in order to enroll in their desired baccalaureate program is often intense.

Some participants felt strongly that deaf students were limited in their options for academic advancement through the English course system at RIT and were prevented from progressing through the curriculum effectively and attaining their desired degrees. Examples of limitations included inappropriate course placement (resulting in courses that were not challenging), course sequences that took too long to complete, conflicting messages to students from different departments, different teaching approaches that confused students, course assignments that seemed irrelevant or unrelated to students’ experiences, insufficient time to complete homework or tests, or rules that were perceived to be arbitrary or silly.

INAPPROPRIATE PLACEMENT

When deaf students enter RIT, they take a writing placement test, in which they are given a prompt, typically, “You are in a new place. Write an essay describing your feelings about the people and the place here.” Faculty members score these tests, and the scores are used to place students in writing classes that match the competency they demonstrate on the tests. Sometimes students are not as careful at writing their essay responses as they
should be, and they are placed at a level lower than they feel they should be. This happened to Moises Jones at the beginning of his college career at RIT, when he was placed in Nonfiction Reading IV and Academic Writing IV, rather than the higher level Written Communication I and II course sequence, which is the prerequisite for RIT's equivalent of Freshman Composition:

But I am a little disappointed because three years ago when I got here for SVP [Summer Vestibule Program, an orientation program for deaf freshmen], I didn't take [...] the English writing from SVP during that three-week program very seriously. I didn't realize that would affect the rest of my career here. So, [after being placed in Reading and Writing IV] I got a really low grade in Reading and Writing IV because those courses didn't motivate me. When I got into Written Communication I and II, I got a B in both of those courses. So, obviously, I would recommend that the teachers explain to us during SVP, during that program, that [the writing placement test] really is important and that we should take it seriously.

Moises apparently felt penalized for his careless writing on the placement test, which caused him to feel demoralized and unmotivated in his initial class placement. He also seemed to feel that he had not been adequately warned about the potential impact of this test on his college career. Once he completed his developmental composition courses (Reading and Writing IV, which bored him) and enrolled in Written Communication I and II, his outlook improved:

When I got into Written Communication I and II, I really liked that because it was a whole new ball game. It was challenging for me. And I was able to make progress, and it was easy for me to learn and keep myself participating.
Once Moises arrived at the course level where he felt he belonged, his motivation increased significantly, and he performed better. He seemed to perceive his participation and work at this level as being a worthwhile investment in his progress through the academic English system because at this point, he felt closer to attaining his degree goal, which had its own special status.

Moises also discussed his perceptions of other students’ abilities and experiences in this system. He observed a similar phenomenon, that of becoming unmotivated in courses that were not challenging.

I think that they should have more testing so that the NTID staff can note where an individual’s needs really are and place them appropriately. I notice with my two roommates this year, both of their English levels are kind of average, and when I see their writing capabilities like on the computer using IM, or when they do their homework, what they write for their homework, both are in Writing III. Actually, one of them is in Writing II, and I see that both really belong in Writing IV. Both have admitted to me that it is just too basic, and they are losing their motivation. It is a waste for both of them, and they have lost their motivation to do the work in that class. I see them hanging out at the dorm and not even going to class because both feel that SVP got them placed in the wrong level. So, I would recommend to the SVP staff that they give more English testing and become more accurate being more sure where the placement ought to be.

The subtext of Moises’ comment seems to be a sort of doubt that the initial placement test is fair and accurate, given how frequently he perceives students to be wrongly placed. He seems to be saying that the test itself does not accurately measure the
abilities that the students do have and that the evaluations of student writing on these tests is not objective or accurate because the expectations do not acknowledge students’ innate abilities. Essentially, the placement test rewards students who demonstrate the “right” kind of literacy skills, conferring upon them a kind of literate citizenship when they are placed in the upper level writing courses.

What Moises does not mention is the difference in requirements and difficulty between the courses designed for students pursuing associate of applied science (AAS) and associate of occupational studies (AOS) degrees and those for students enrolled in baccalaureate degree programs. The placement tests are intended to match students with courses commensurate with both their skill levels and degree program placements. In other words, students who demonstrate the literacy skills required for upper level courses will be placed in those courses, but students who do not demonstrate these skills will be placed in remedial courses for the purpose of learning these skills.

Other students objected to the tradition that deaf students are automatically restricted to certain composition courses at RIT. At RIT, the Freshman Composition course, which used to be a two-course sequence called Writing and Literature I and II at the time of this study and now is a single course called Writing Seminar, is required for all students. Sections are offered for deaf students, taught by instructors who sign for themselves in the classroom. Deaf students are discouraged from registering for mainstream sections with hearing students, and interpreting services are not provided for these sections for two reasons: the demand for interpreters in classes at RIT exceeds the availability, and deaf students may take this course with signing instructors, permitting RIT to allocate interpreters for other courses that are not taught by instructors who sign for themselves.
Kaylee Wallin was particularly critical of this restriction, beginning her interview with these extensive comments in response to the first interview question, which was, “Tell me about being a student in English courses at RIT.”

As a deaf student with sign language skills, when you register for Writing and Lit I or II, those courses with the hearing teacher, it is a hearing teacher for deaf students. You are not allowed to register for the hearing classes. You have to register with the teacher for deaf students. So, I wasn’t given much choice as to what kind of Writing and Lit I course I wanted to take.

Kaylee went on to explain that one reason she resented this particular restriction was because she perceived that hearing students had the option of picking teachers who assigned fewer essays or projects, whereas deaf students were limited to teachers who famously assigned a great deal of homework, including required first drafts and annotation of readings. She explained:

There were some teachers who had the whole class write four papers and that was it. Four papers. Now, I am the kind of girl who can start a paper at 2 in the morning and finish at 4. I am just able to do it. Some people have that capability, and I am one of those. The problem with the all-deaf sections was that I couldn’t have that flexibility. I have to prepare a rough draft. I mean, obviously, I came into college with the ability to write. I mean, some hearing people can write, and some hearing people can’t write. But, to write a rough draft, I get messed up with that. And the teacher demanded that I had to write a rough draft. But she read my work, she knew my ability, and she still made me prepare a rough draft. Now, I am at the
college level, and I am taking college level English courses so needless to say, Writing and Lit I and II were a cinch.

Kaylee resented being forced to comply with a set of rules and standards different from those she perceived hearing students were given, simply because she was deaf and placed in a particular group of courses. She felt that her academic literacy was not being recognized or respected, and she felt that was wrong. She also explained that she did not want to be slowed down by less-skilled peers, that she did not want to be held back.

The department, the English Department, the deaf department at RIT, over there, does not give students choices, options. Some students start from Writing I and go on from there. And they want to work with them, and that is great. I mean, they want to be with teachers of the deaf, and that is completely, totally understandable. For my life in the mainstream, I was used to a faster pace because some of my classes were more minimal. You know what I mean? And that is fine. That’s great for the benefit of those students, but I felt that they were holding other students back like for example, I think that I should have the option if I wanted to go into a class where there were just other RIT students, I think that I should have that option.

The subtext of Kaylee’s comment seems to be that she felt she was being held back simply because she was deaf and was subjected to the same expectations as other deaf students, even though she had demonstrated strong academic literacy in her placement tests.
Homework

Homework was a topic that came up often in interviews. It was raised as a problem in a variety of ways, as being excessive or inappropriate. Sami felt that she never had enough time to complete her homework satisfactorily, “I wish when they gave me an assignment, I had more time to put into it, but I don’t.”

Joseph described one course’s complicated homework schedule:

In the past, class was Mondays and Wednesdays, but the homework was due Fridays. Now class is Tuesdays and Thursdays, but the homework is due Mondays…. but other homework is due Tuesday too.

Undergoing this regimen was tiring for Joseph, particularly because he felt that it was beyond his capabilities at times:

I feel sick of Written Comm I when I finish the homework, but then I realize there’s more to do. I just get sick of it. No, the other homework is nothing, just takes me a half hour or an hour, but English takes me two hours. I’ll work, stress out, then leave it a bit, then go back. I have to look, analyze, think. I like it because it helps me see the whole picture, but there’s just so much; I finish thinking about one question, then I have to think about another one. I thought I finished it, but the teacher says no, more. But that’s all I think!

The cognitive and literacy challenges posed by the homework assignments felt daunting to Joseph, who did the best he felt he could, only to be told that he had not met all the requirements or included possible analysis (“I thought I finished it, but the teacher says no, more. But that’s all I think!”). Joseph shows awareness that his teacher expects him to
demonstrate a higher level of literacy than he exhibits with his work, but he seems to feel that he has done all he can.

Kaylee was annoyed by what she considered to be busy work assignments, especially annotation of articles she had to read for her writing courses:

I never heard of annotation before I came to college. And if I don’t understand the reading, I’ll just read it again. I don’t really see the point of annotating. Now they force me to annotate, and I think that is wrong. I understand the material, and that is enough. I don’t need to do that.

By annotation, Kaylee refers to the requirement that students highlight key passages and write margin notes and questions for themselves in articles they read and then show this work to their teachers. Kaylee felt that she had mastered the material and that by demanding that she annotate her readings, an activity she did not perceive as helpful or useful to her, her teacher was not respecting her abilities.

Joseph also felt that much of his homework for his writing course was boring:

Right. I can’t focus on all of them at the same time because the teacher is selfish. No, not selfish, but this class takes a lot more of my time than other classes do. This is only just one course! And it is really a lot more work than all of them. This class is boring, and my other classes are much more fun because they are in my major.

In this remark, Joseph reveals that he does not perceive the English course to be as relevant to his life and goals as his major courses.

**Requirements Take Too Long**

The English curriculum for deaf students at RIT is extensive, allowing for a large range of possible placements and reflecting the great variety of skill levels students bring to
college. At the time of this study, the NTID English courses were offered in two strands, one for reading and the other for writing. Both strands begin at the Reading I or Writing I level for the least-prepared students and continue up through Reading and Writing IV. To enroll in a writing course, students must have completed the equivalent level of reading course first or demonstrated a reading test placement that met the prerequisite test score. To enroll in the pre-baccalaureate writing course sequence, Written Communication I and II, students must have demonstrated the required placement test scores or passed Reading and Writing IV with a C or better. To enroll in the RIT Freshman Composition course, which at the time of the interviews was a two-course sequence called Writing and Literature I and II, students needed to demonstrate appropriate test scores or a passing grade in Written Communication II. All together, a deaf student who begins at a Level A course (Reading or Writing I) and who desires an associate of applied science degree or a bachelor’s degree from RIT will have to take a total of 11 English courses before completing all the English requirements. Of course, if students demonstrate appropriate college reading and writing skills, they can bypass most, if not all, of the remedial courses.

Roxanne Flores felt that students often were forced to stay at the developmental/remedial level for too long:

A drawback is that it takes a lot of time because it is so step-by-step. I think that they should integrate the reading and the writing courses because it really takes a lot of students so much time here. You know, you can waste years and years, three years at NTID! So that is the only negative part. Yes. It is like some people arrive here at level A, and then they need to progress through that. They might fail one or two of the courses and need to take them over again course by course. But, if you
integrated the reading and the writing, they could develop their English and do it more quickly so that they can get into RIT, you know? They could get into the advanced courses quicker.

Moises Jones shared Roxanne’s opinion that courses should be combined to facilitate students’ completing the curriculum more quickly:

And secondly, get rid of Writing I, II, II and IV and replace those because in my opinion, Writing I and Writing II should be combined into one course. And Writing III and IV should be combined into a second course. To save students time so that it doesn’t drag out so long. Like for example, a lot of my friends who are in my major […] are third-year students, but they are in Writing III, and the reason why is because they follow NTID’s silly rules. Again, I don’t mean to be insulting, but they have to take Writing I, and they can’t take Writing I and Reading II at the same time. You have to take Writing I and Reading I concurrently, simultaneously, and Writing II and Reading II at the same time. And students get stuck because of scheduling conflicts. And they get out of sequence. And for some students who start with Writing I, it is going to take them five or six years to graduate if they get out of sequence. So I would suggest from what I have seen with my friends and their homework and their use of writing on IM, and their use of language, I think that if you combine Writing I and II, that will work well. And combine Writing III and IV, and that will work well.

Both Moises and Roxanne’s suggestions focus on expediting students’ progress through the academic English course system, thereby helping them earn their degrees
sooner. Their perspective of the time on task required by this system is that it is a hindrance and obstacle rather than a means of improving skills.

**Mixed Messages**

Some students talked about their perception that they were told different things by different people. Sometimes this related to specific assignments, other times it related to assessments of assignments. This perception is significant in the context of participants navigating what they consider to be a challenging system, one that may not always have their best interests at the forefront.

Kofu Brown discussed his perception that some teachers thought highly of his skills, whereas others did not, which confused him:

They waived Writing IV and Reading IV because my scores were pretty high, and then some teachers had told me that I didn’t need to go to tutoring and whatever. Other teachers told me that I should go to tutoring. And a few of the teachers had different methods of teaching English. So I got confused more. For example, one of the teachers would say something, and I would raise my hand and I thought that the other teacher said this. And the second teacher would disagree with what the first teacher said because they had different methods. And each individual had their own method of teaching, and each one assumed that their method would help us to understand the best. So it was really interesting and completely different between here and what I had learned at CSUN. The course at CSUN was kind of the same as the course here, but the teachers forced us to write more. And that helped us find where our weaknesses were instead of going to tutoring. They wouldn’t let us go to tutoring until we had already identified what areas we were weak in. And that
worked for us. I found that my area of weakness was structure, and my English really improved a lot.

In this narrative, Kofu explains two mixed messages that he received. The first was that his high scores granted him a certain status and placement, which he felt was disrespected by the teachers who told him to go to tutoring. The second was his experience in trying to reconcile what he perceived as conflicting instructions from teachers. He seems to feel there was a lack of consistency among the faculty’s approaches, especially compared with the faculty from his previous college, who apparently were more consistent in assigning similar types of writing assignments that he felt enabled him to identify where he needed to improve.

Jackie Frieda mentioned that she preferred to stay with one English teacher because she felt that she understood that instructor’s expectations and explanations:

Probably because every quarter, with a different teacher each time, they have different expectations of what they wanted us to do so it is hard to keep track of what they want when at times, you may be used to the method that you have been taught or learned during the quarter before from a different teacher. I remember going through that, and I felt it was hard enough to learn different ways or creates the frustration. For example, I learned how to write a compare and contrast paper from one of the teachers, what was taught, and it was easy because I understood what the teacher expected from me. I then wrote another compare and contrast using the same expectation or what I had learned and turned the paper in to a different teacher, and the grade I got was bad, and I was confused. What did the
teacher really want? That is when I decided to register the course with the same
teacher each quarter as I go up because I know what the teacher expected of me.
In the challenging context of the academic English system, Jackie’s preference for
staying with the same teacher is understandable given that she felt able to focus on the
course assignments and goals without worrying about whether she understood the
teacher’s expectations. Zara also discussed how she felt confused among the different
teaching methods she experienced:

From my experience, I was overwhelmed when I came into class at NTID English. I
was just overwhelmed because all of the teachers had their own different way of
teaching, and it really confused me. I am still frustrated to this day. And the reason
is, well, let me give you an example. The deaf professors would encourage group
discussion, and each student would share their perspective, and we would see all of
the different ideas people had. The hearing professors tended to be well, just do it
your own way and follow the recipe almost of what you are supposed to do to write,
and the teachers, what they expected from the students was very different,
depending upon who the teacher was. And their teaching methods were different.
Some would have computers set up all over the classroom. Sometimes they would
use pencil and paper with hang-man and try to figure out what the sentence was.
Like, “I am driving to the store.” So the teacher expected us to get the words down
in past tense and change it from past to present, whether it was past tense or
present tense, and it would confuse me. I am driving to the store. I drove to the
store. I mean, I am driving should be present tense and I drove, past tense. But, I
mean, it gets really confusing.
In Zara’s narrative, she mentions two issues. The first is what she perceives as a dramatic difference between her deaf and hearing teachers. After she explains how her deaf teachers conducted class with the use of group discussion, she then explains the various teaching strategies used by her hearing teachers, none of which were discussion-based and all of which she found challenging. Her confusion reflects a confluence of not understanding the material with feeling stymied by the different approaches used to teach the material.

This perception of mixed messages on the part of several participants seems to reveal an almost invisible moving target for the participants: that of learning, understanding, and successfully using the rules of the academic English system. This target seems to be constantly shifting in the participants’ eyes because they continue to strive, and yet they don’t feel successful for one reason or another. They feel as if they must continually negotiate unexpected changes or shifts in otherwise familiar situations.

In the next chapter, my participants will explain their experiences with and perceptions of the teachers they worked with in this academic English system.
CHAPTER 5
ASSISTIVE AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

The process of learning frequently requires assistance and collaboration, as Vygotsky famously posited, and my informants spoke at length about these two types of influences on their academic English learning experiences.

TUTORING

This section discusses what my participants raised regarding working one on one with others, typically called tutoring, a phenomenon shared by many participants that played a large role in their academic English system experiences. Tutoring was a topic that came up often, with some participants endorsing it, and others not. Tutoring was discussed at length during the focus group with five of the participants, and the intensity and duration of the discussion reflected on the importance of this service and experience to these participants.

Tutoring for these students refers to several services. These services are available both at the NTID Learning Center (NLC) and the RIT Academic Support Center (ASC). It can mean simply working one on one with someone. It also can mean working specifically with a teacher or a professional tutor or with a peer tutor.

A teacher in the tutoring situation discussed in this study can be the participant’s actual course instructor or a different NTID faculty member who is working in the NLC. Tutors also often are professionals who have been hired by NTID to work in the NLC. Typically these tutors teach English elsewhere, perhaps at the Rochester School for the Deaf or within the Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) system, and they
possess strong sign language skills and are generally prepared to work with students like this study’s participants. The participants sometimes referred to these tutors as staff tutors. Less often mentioned are the tutors who work in the ASC, who typically are hearing people who do not use sign language.

A peer tutor is a deaf college student hired by NTID to work with other deaf students on English-related course projects. Peer tutors qualify for their positions by having completed all of their required English courses with grades of B or better and by maintaining an overall grade point average of 3.5. Peer tutors mentioned in this study work in the NLC.

Participants went to tutors for all sorts of reasons under the aegis of getting help with their English coursework. Sometimes they just wanted to get their papers edited, but others would frequently work with tutors as another way of learning English.

Help with Writing

Tutors often were considered resources for help in improving reading and writing skills. Jackie Frieda said she went to tutors for help with her writing, especially as it related to writing for a particular audience or reader:

Because I’m not good in English. I grew up horrible, and I think it’s important to have another person’s mind so I can understand the audience a little bit better.

Jackie’s comment reveals that she recognizes the need to confirm the clarity of her thinking and writing, and she relies on tutors to help her do this. In addition to working one-on-one with his teachers, Mike Massa relied heavily on tutoring as a way to bring his English skills up to the level required for success in college:
And when I arrived, there were high expectations for writing a lot of papers and research papers, too, and I knew that I was really behind in my writing skills. So I went ahead and tried to go to tutoring at the NLC. I went, and wow, there was a lot of tutoring available. That was nice, plus the teachers had office hours available, too. That was nice. I would go to the teachers for office hours one or two times a week plus tutoring two or three times a week.

One of Mike’s primary strategies for improving his English was to work with more skilled English users, and he devoted considerable time to these partnerships as an investment in progressing through the academic English system.

**WORKING WITH TEACHERS RATHER THAN PEER TUTORS**

Some participants preferred to work with teachers rather than peer tutors. Roxanne Flores spoke at length about how important tutoring was for her, particularly when working with the teachers:

What really helps here a lot is the tutoring. They have peer tutors and teachers, but I would rather go to the teachers directly. I am more comfortable with the teachers because they know, well they really know what is expected for their courses. Whereas the peer tutors don’t know the course expectations as much as the teachers do. But they really benefited my writing a lot. Sometimes the teachers can’t meet one-on-one that often with the students to explain things in general. They could tell us what our weaknesses were, and then we could go to tutoring, and the tutors have more time to spend with us individually to explain things in depth. And that really helped because we couldn’t depend on the teachers that much for individual sessions. The tutors were more available for one-on-one meetings.
Roxanne felt that she would receive from her teachers assistance targeted specifically to her course requirements, which she preferred over the peer tutors. However, she does credit the peer tutors for helping her with her writing because they were more available than the teachers were.

Like Roxanne, Moises Jones preferred working with faculty members one-on-one more than with peer tutors:

That helped me a lot, the tutoring. And I don’t like peer tutoring with peers because they are not aware of each of the instructors’ requirements. I would rather work with actual staff because they are very aware of the teachers and their requirements plus they might have taught Writing and Lit I and II themselves as well. I mean, they are teachers, and I could meet with them and focus on things at a specific level that would help me with my homework and exams for later on. And that would help me succeed in my efforts with English.

Joseph Goino also liked working on his English course projects one on one, but disliked going to peer tutors:

I would rather one on one. I don’t understand why they have student tutors instead of staff tutors because I don’t think the student tutors have the same knowledge as the staff. I would rather go to a real English teacher for help. But with a student, they’ll say it’s wrong, and I’ll say I can do it that way, but I just need to change it a little bit. Or they’ll say, don’t use that word, and I’ll say, it’s fine. I’d rather use my words and just fix my grammar, that’s all. They try to change my words.

Joseph felt that the peer tutors were less knowledgeable about assignment requirements and were more prone to imposing their own styles on his writing, which he
objected to. He also simply wanted grammar correction, a request commonly made by deaf students.

**WORKING WITH PEER TUTORS**

Unlike Roxanne, Moises, and Joseph, Jackie Frieda preferred peer tutors over faculty tutors:

But then sometimes when the teacher is not available, I would go to NLC for peer tutoring, and we would sit down and talk it through, out loud, sign it. “Does that make sense? No. Yeah. Ehhh.” That way that gives me flexibility because they don’t have that style. There’s no pressure. There’s no different ways. I know what the teacher wants. I follow that. But I notice I had one faculty tutoring, and I said this is what we have to do, and they said “no,” and would kind of change it, and then I would bring it to the teacher and “no.” It’s frustrating to me.

It gave me the flexibility to . . . peer tutoring helped me to write sentences.

Understand the paragraph or am I doing it right. The grammar area. Yeah, the grammar area aspect. But the thinking related to the teacher question, what they want, it’s separated.

In this comment, Jackie explains that when working with peer tutors, she could be responsible for understanding and remembering what her teacher wanted while asking the peer tutors to help her work through her ideas and her grammar.

**CONFLICT BETWEEN TUTOR ADVICE AND TEACHER EXPECTATIONS**

Several participants mentioned experiences where they would follow tutor advice, only to discover that their teachers disagreed or gave them a lower grade as a result. They
found this situation to be confusing and challenging. Moises Jones brought this up during the focus group:

And the tutor that I went to last night said everything looked fine. But then when I went to the teacher, the teacher asked me what it was that I meant by this sentence. And the tutor told me something different than what the teacher had told me. And the teacher knows the information. I would think that the tutor knows the information, but the information was conflicting. And I trusted the teacher more than I trusted the tutor. And that was something that was hard.

In this narrative, Moises reveals that he had hoped the tutor would be able to guide him through the academic English process in a similar way as the teacher, but he felt that this did not happen. He concluded that the teacher was the best resource in the end because the teacher determined his final grade, not the tutor, but he still seems to feel disappointed that he could not rely on the tutor.

In the same focus group conversation, Joseph Goino felt that his work with the tutor actually pulled down his grades at times:

Well, my experience with the tutor, it was an older woman. I wrote what I needed to write, and I went down for my final draft. I handed my essay into the teacher, and the teacher gave me a low grade. And I thought well, gee, I had already gone and edited this with the tutor, and I was really upset that I got a low grade because I had gone to the tutor.

Joseph reveals a sense of betrayal in that he felt his time and efforts with the tutor had not benefited his paper or his grade.
WHEN TUTORING WAS NOT HELPFUL

Many participants commented on how helpful tutoring was for them. Sami Bradley, however, experienced frustration with tutoring:

I noticed that it was frustrating at tutoring sometimes. My first year when I got here, that experience, it was like the tutors didn’t go into depth at all. I would try to get some insight, and they would say, well, no, that sentence is wrong, fix it....Yeah, I hoped to get more. I wanted to get some in-depth feedback. But I mean, they only had an hour, and you could stay with them for an hour, and then it was out of there. So, there was a limited amount of time to work with a tutor one-on-one.

Sami wanted more intensive time and work with the tutors so that she could understand and improve her English, but apparently her needs surpassed the available tutoring resources, and this was frustrating for her. Roxanne also mentioned that she favored more tutoring resources:

I think that there needs to be more tutoring. I mean, I know it depends, but most deaf students really need to depend on tutoring for grammar, and it is not their fault. I mean, we have fluency in ASL, but we need more time and attention, and in tutoring, the lines are so long. Plus some of the tutors are really serious and go into depth, and others don’t. In the day, they have teachers, but at nighttime they have RIT students coming to tutor, and sometimes it is like they don’t do a thorough job. It is good enough, and that's it. They just do barely enough. They don’t go into depth.

The subtext of Roxanne’s remarks, along with Sami’s, is that some students need such intensive remediation in English that the available resources are not sufficient ("I
mean, we have fluency in ASL, but we need more time and attention, and in tutoring, the lines are so long."). Furthermore, the help actually given is not as intensive as they would prefer because other students also need tutoring, creating a sense of competition and frustration.

**When Tutoring Really Helps**

Sami, whose overall tutoring experiences were not positive (she discusses the interplay of tutoring with teachers’ attitudes in Chapter 6), did relate one epiphany she experienced in the tutoring center with a deaf tutor:

One of the first times that I really had an “aha” experience in class was with the tutor at the NTID Learning Center. I was working on a sentence, and I guess I used the phrase “look forward to something” incorrectly. And it was “look forward to seeing you” or something like that, and the tutor, who was also a deaf guy, explained to me that I wasn’t using it correctly. And I had the verb “see,” and we looked at that, and he showed me examples of different ways you could say it, and different contexts that it could be used in, and he told me the grammatical rules. Then we went back to the sentence that I had written... where I had “look forward to,” and then I understood after he signed it enough, “look forward to seeing you.” I realized that’s how that works, the progressive tense in English. And it was a real “aha” experience, and I really enjoyed that incorporated into my writing. But it didn’t happen again. I went to meet with different tutors, and they just tend to say no, that’s wrong and mark up all of my mistakes. But they didn’t really teach the concept. And I believe that deaf students have an internal visual structure to their language and that can be
used to teach English grammatical structure. It was a great experience with that one tutor.

This anecdote from Sami seems to confirm that proverb, "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime." Sami seems to have felt empowered by this learning experience, where she was able to understand a grammatical concept and then apply it to her own writing. Zara had a similarly positive experience with a deaf tutor:

I had one special tutor that helped me a lot. I could sign things and translate them. I would sign to the tutor, and she would copy it down in English, in English sentences. In terms of what I would see, for example, the girl ran screaming for help. A deaf person might write "that girl run help." And the tutor, well, would sign it differently, more expressively than deaf people would write it, emphasizing certain points.

This observation from Zara reveals the significant linguistic difference between English, a highly inflected written language, and American Sign Language, which is not a written language and which relies heavily on facial expression and classifiers to provide syntax and morphology that can be difficult for deaf students to render thoroughly in comparable English. The simple sentence that Zara provided as an example—"that girl run help"—has great potential to be elaborated both in English and ASL, but frequently deaf students lack the English vocabulary to express the intensity and detail of the action and emotion in the sentence. A person with a strong English vocabulary and good control of grammar could write a more interesting and elaborate sentence, such as "the traumatized and bleeding 8-year-old girl ran away screaming for help, her hair flopping out of her ponytail behind her." Sami addresses this as well, later in the chapter.
Unlike Sami, who expressed an intense emotional connection to her tutoring experiences, Joseph mentions the role of tutoring in passing as he discusses his efforts to pass his English courses:

The topics weren’t interesting. I didn’t do the reading because the teacher would lecture, and I would sit there and listen and take advantage of that instead of reading. But sometimes I’d have to read anyway to answer questions. But now I’m taking it again, and I’m trying to be serious, and just suffer through it with tutoring and help just to get a C or the best I can.

When Joseph says he plans to “just suffer through it with tutoring and help just to get a C or the best I can,” he seems to consider tutoring to be a necessary evil or an essential part of the academic English system that can help him get through his course if he uses it. He does not seem to view tutoring as a learning opportunity as other participants did, merely as a means to an end.

Tutoring as a Means Toward Language Acquisition

Several students described how they would go to tutors and be confronted with the limitations of their English vocabularies and English syntax. Sometimes they welcomed the challenge to develop their English skills to match their expressiveness in ASL, other times they felt resentful at having their weaknesses or shortcomings highlighted. In the focus group, in response to a conversation-starting question, “did you benefit from your tutoring experience?”, Joseph responded:

No. I didn’t benefit because the tutor wanted to change the words to make it fit. But rather than make it smooth, they just wanted to take words out and add words.
Joseph seems to view his tutoring experience as an exercise in editing rather than a learning opportunity. Kaylee Wallin, who at the time of the focus group also worked as a peer tutor in the NLC, responded:

Sometimes some people put in a word that is the wrong word because they don't understand what it means. Like with each word, like the word beautiful or gorgeous. Gorgeous would be more than just beautiful. And so sometimes you have to put whatever fits that situation, and sometimes you have to take out a word and put in another word that would fit that situation better.

Joseph and Kaylee clearly have different points of view on the same situation, reflecting the difference in their academic English literacy and their positions in the academic English system. Joseph merely wanted to pass, and Kaylee has succeeded from a different vantage point. Unlike Joseph, Sami perceived tutoring as a real opportunity to enhance her English skills, which was an ongoing challenge for her. She explained this in the focus group conversation:

Well, for example, when I met with the tutor one-on-one, we have the languages ASL and English, and I would have the sentence and say, suppose it was, for example, in the theater, I grew personally with my skills. And so I would write “grow.” But when you interpret it the way that I had written the English, it was like I meant grow up like maturing throughout the years. But I didn’t mean that. And it is more like how a flower matures. But the way I had written it in English, that was the meaning it conveyed. So a hearing person told me that I really need to expand my concepts to really explain what I am talking about. Whereas in deaf language, I don’t necessarily need to do that. In ASL, I can just tell them what I mean, and we can convey that. But
the tutor that really helped me forced me to look into thesauruses and dictionaries to see the variety of words that I could use. And that is my experience.

Sami had over time developed a sensitivity to and awareness of the differences between ASL and English, but she continued to chafe a little at the demands of English, which were different than those of ASL in terms of how she expressed herself. Nonetheless, she did continue her efforts to expand her vocabulary and improve her grammar.

Like Sami, Joseph was more comfortable with ASL. However, he also indicated less willingness to work independently to improve his English. In high school, he apparently was able to have much of his communication translated into English, which may have hindered his development as an independent writer. In the focus group, he revealed:

When I wrote an essay if I knew how to write one of these words. I mean sometimes the signing was so much easier than writing the words. And some of the deaf teachers would help because they knew how to write the more complex vocabulary. And so it was easier for me. And then they would write it for me, and then I would take it, and then I would put it into my own words because in high school I had a notetaker and an interpreter. And the interpreter spoke for me, and then the notetaker would write. And then what would happen is I would take the notetaker’s writing, and then I would hand that in to the teacher. And I liked that way. But I felt that that wasn’t, you know, that isn’t available for everyone. But that is actually what I had done at one time.

In this narrative, Joseph describes how the interpreter voiced his ASL for the notetaker to transcribe. He recognizes that this is an unusual situation, and he says that it
was very comfortable for him since he did not have to write from scratch, which he ended up having to do in college and which presented a significant challenge to him.

One participant who was fiercely independent and very interested in developing his English and challenging himself was Kofu Brown. He responded to Joseph’s story by remarking, “I think that when I go to the tutor, I haven’t really learned anything. Because, they put words in my head and I am like oh, okay. And then I just use the words that they give me.” Moises Jones echoed his agreement. Then Kofu went on to explain why he was resistant to going to tutors:

When I am outside of class, I tend to do my best because I am wondering and thinking about it. When the teacher reads my essays, he gives me time, and he says you need to investigate the words themselves. Why would you use that specific word or wanting to have specific definition? So I followed what the teacher said and I went home, and I put more time into my essay thinking about the words. And I started writing my rough draft, and I would look at a dictionary, and I would use different words, and I would be thinking about what was the overall goal of my essay? And I would take the time to investigate the words themselves and what they meant because one word can mean many things. And so from that point on, I don’t depend on the tutor. I tend to do my best work without the tutor.

Interestingly, as the focus group conversation continued and after Kofu had clarified that he really didn’t want to have his personal vocabulary influenced by tutors, Joseph seemed to adopt a different outlook on vocabulary development:

I think what you are talking about for our English class when you are talking about writing all the words, you have to show the definitions and then use the words. And
then you have to find another meaning for the same word. I think that is really helpful to help us to understand the language because right now I am working on cheating and essays. And cheating can mean two different things. Cheating in a score like if you are playing dirty. Like cheating has many different meanings, and I didn’t realize that until I started doing this essay work. And then I am like, oh, okay, this word can apply to different settings. So, that is one strategy that has helped me develop my essay writing.

Joseph seems to have been influenced by the broader minded approach taken by several of the other participants and encouraged to step outside of his “English is hard” point of view into a more productive ownership oriented view of working with English.

ASC vs. NTID

Deaf students can go to either the RIT tutoring service, Academic Support Center (ASC), or the NTID Tutoring Center (NLC) for help. In her interview, Sami provided a very detailed comparison between the ASC and the NLC:

ASC. Okay. And I went there first, and I have been going there this quarter, during fall quarter. I have been going there a lot, and I kept meeting with the same tutor who doesn’t sign at all. The hearing, they don’t sign at all. And I wanted to experiment with that, face the challenge that I would face if I were out in the hearing world. And we communicated by writing back and forth. And she would look over my papers, and you know, I tend to write almost like ASL, so if she didn’t understand, she would tell me the parts of my paper that she didn’t understand. I might get a book with pictures or something and try and show her, and she would work with me. So we would work on clarifying what it was that I meant until she
understood, and then she would tell me things like well, you know, it is “ed.” It is important for past tense in English. You know, something that happened before and not that is happening right now. And she would work on my grammar with me and help edit my writing, and I turned in the papers, and I was getting good grades. I was getting A’s on the papers that I was writing.

At the ASC, Sami received help she felt was useful and productive, help that translated into good grades for her. She seems to have found a very open-minded tutor who was able to listen closely (or read closely, since they were writing back and forth) to her message and purpose and offer feedback that enabled her to revise her writing in a way that not only met the requirements of the assignments, but also addressed possible areas of confusion for the instructors. This changed, however, when she went to the NLC:

Then about two weeks ago, I was in a big hurry, so I figured that I would go to the NLC for tutoring for some English. And I went over to the NLC, and the same thing, it was a summary paper that I typed up, and it was about a different artist, and a hearing teacher from the English Department came over. And I showed him my work and explained what course it was for. And this tutor looked it over, and there was one spot that was a little rough, and he asked me what I meant. And I explained that the teacher expected us to write using appropriate technical terminology or jargon for art. And the tutor said well, I would leave it. So, to clarify I asked, you mean you would leave the word, or you would leave the sentence? I wanted to make sure if the syntax was okay or wrong. And I thought you know, I expected that I would have to change it because I don’t really do that great when I type up my first draft. And I asked if they understood it, and they assured me that they did
understand it. And you know, they would ask me a few times what different passages meant and I told them. And they said, oh, leave it the way that you have it written. I would leave it. Then they told me that they weren’t going to write anything. If you want to change something, you write it. And I think that maybe some of it was run on or not exactly pertinent. I mentioned that there were some details about their family life, and I wasn’t sure how much or how to include that. And they said well, you go ahead and write that yourself. And then they looked at it again and told me like some very minor changes like adding “is” to one sentence. So, I left the NLC and turned in that paper and I got a B. And the comment said well, why didn’t you add this word?

At the NLC, Sami seems to have gotten more forgiving feedback, feedback designed to recognize her particular challenges as a second language learner, but feedback that she felt disadvantaged her in that she had become more aware through her experience at the ASC of what her mainstream hearing professors expected. She continued with her narrative by discussing the difference she perceived between the two services:

And so I looked at the results from both, and the teacher had written nice, positive comments about how clear my writing was when I went to the ASC for tutoring. And the one time that I went to the NLC to get tutoring, the feedback wasn’t as good. So, I thought gee, maybe I am more comfortable, and I felt a little disappointed that I hadn’t gone to the RIT ASC to get the tutoring because they did it in such depth, and they challenged me so much and edited so aggressively to get kind of perfect English where at the NLC, I think they left in more grammatical errors because they wanted my writing to better match my signing. I am not sure if that was their way of doing
things, but I expected that they would translate it more aggressively into flawless English. So, that was my experience comparing both of those. Next quarter I am going to have a lot of writing for a lot of my courses. I have got Film and Language and Psychology. So, maybe I will get a chance to experiment again and see how it goes with the NLC or with the ASC in the two departments.

Sami talked about this disparity between the NTID and RIT tutoring centers during the focus group, indicating the importance of this issue to her and the fact that she continues to seek out clarity and understanding as she tries to write grammatically correct and complex English that reflects her ASL. In the focus group, Sami retold the same story she related in her interview and elaborated on the perceived superficiality of the tutoring help she received at NTID versus the help she got at the RIT tutoring center.

I have experienced two different teachers and student tutors as well. In my experience, the tutors, the RIT tutors, I wrote whatever I wrote, and the tutor would say, I don’t understand that. And I showed them my concept, visually what I wanted to say. And I would interpret what my English meant, and then the tutor would talk about words. And then they would say, well, this word has several different meanings. And you have to take the meaning of the word and match it to what you are thinking. So, we had to do that. It wasn’t just putting English words on paper. That was with the RIT tutor.

And with the NTID tutor, I wrote down my essay, and they asked me what I meant, and I told them what I meant to say. And they said, well I am not sure about this. If you want to leave it that way you can. That’s your right. But the NTID tutor didn’t really challenge me with the complexity of English language and the variety of
words I could use. And it was all right. I mean, I worked okay with the tutor, but then when I gave it into my teacher, noticing that I had been to two different tutors, I got two different grades. And so after that I started going to the RIT tutors because I felt that those tutors really help me visualize and help me to interpret my ASL ideas into English and help me to do that better.

In her first interview, Sami provided a little analysis of what may actually be taking place in these two situations:

Some of the teachers at the NLC or some of the RIT instructors may look at the English and say okay, that’s good enough. And some of the NTID people may correct it and edit it much more aggressively. I mean I understand that it is a deaf college, and the English teachers have high expectations and want to push the deaf students to improve their English skills. So, they may grade even more strictly. At the same time, the students may get really turned off by that because they feel like they are always doing it wrong. In the RIT classes, they may be more motivated to learn and pick up more. I think that it depends on the students’ attitudes as well. It is an open question. I mean, I hear from some students that the RIT teachers are really strict. Some say they are easy. I hear from other students that the NTID teachers are really strict or really easy. But, I think that the teachers need to find some way to express their expectations so that the students know what they expect.

What Sami seems to be saying is that the faculty and tutors who work with students at the associate degree level are more rigorous in focusing on students’ English grammar, whereas those who work with baccalaureate-level students focus more on the academic concepts and subject matter.
The pink slip

A particularly unpopular subject was the long-standing practice of requiring students to produce a pink slip, a form outlining tutoring needs filled out by teachers, before they receive tutoring for the higher level writing courses. This practice was instituted by the faculty on the support department that works with deaf students in the pre-baccalaureate and baccalaureate English courses (Written Communication I and II and Writing and Literature I and II). Teachers’ expectation of the tutors when they receive this pink slip was that they will provide only the assistance noted on the pink slip and nothing else. Mike Massa disliked this procedure:

During tutoring they have this pink paper, and I wish that they didn’t require that pink paper for reading. For example, some students need to go to tutoring, reading in the evening for tomorrow or two days later. And they go to meet with the tutors, and the tutor says, the NLC says sorry, I can’t help you because you don’t have one of the pink papers. And they have to go to the teacher and get this pink paper before they can go for tutoring, and they need help with reading. So it is like that, right? I know I understand writing a paper, they can work with one another on writing. You know, to tell you the truth, the tutors help them write the papers, but [the teachers] prefer that it wasn’t necessary, and in my opinion, I would suggest that the students be free to go to tutoring any time that they want, morning, noon or night. I mean, the hours sometimes are very limited, and I think that they don’t give the students enough practice, and I hope that they would change that system soon where you didn’t need a paper. Or you get one paper that was good for the whole quarter for
reading and for writing too, and you would be able to go whenever it was convenient so that you could go and get tutoring when you were free.

The combination of the required form with the limited tutoring hours created obstacles for students attempting to improve their skills, in Mike’s mind. Roxanne also felt very strongly that the pink slips were a barrier, for many of the same reasons Mike did:

And then the pink slips. We have got to get rid of them. They drive me crazy because I have got other classes that I need to focus on, and then I need another permission slip, and then they are going to close in a little while. And it is not long enough. I mean, you have fifteen minutes [allotted time for tutoring], and that isn't enough. So, like for example, I went there, and I waited for fifteen minutes, and then I had to wait while another student was there, another fifteen minutes, and then I went for fifteen minutes. And then I had to wait again, and at the NTID Learning Center, I think you have thirty minutes. Is it 30 or 35 minutes? Maybe 30 minutes. I believe it is 30 minutes if no one is there. It depends if someone is available for an hour so that you can get tutoring. But I think that I need to get a tutor right now, but I saw the tutor go by so I know that they are not there right now. The pink slips I thought were only for writing, but I think that they should, all the majors should use pink slips because that would help us, but really they drive me crazy.

Like Roxanne, Moises Jones strongly disliked the pink slips, and he explained why in great detail during the focus group discussion:

That word, tutor, it means to get help in a specific area. But I really feel like that there is some discrimination when we go to the NTID Learning Center. You know that pink form? Are you familiar with that pink form? Because we have to put down
that Writing and Literature I, and then the tutor goes oh, oh, okay, picks out just a few things on my work and then says okay, bye. But, when I go to the Writing and Literature teacher, they help me with the organization and the grammar and the structure, and I tend to get more than just the one thing that I check on the pink form when I go to the tutor. The teacher really helps me in many different areas instead of just one specific area. And so that is why I feel like that there is a little bit of discrimination. So, that is why I have gotten lesser grades than what I had expected when I have gone to the tutors. So, my suggestion is to just set fire to that pink form! Throw it out!

Essentially, Moises felt that the pink slips limited the kind of help students could receive from tutors, and he felt that this was a barrier, an unfair imposition on students working very hard to succeed in the academic English system. At the time of this writing, the pink slip had been eliminated.

MAKING THE TRANSITION FROM TUTORING HELP TO INDEPENDENCE

During the focus group, Sami seemed to find a possible resolution to the conflict she seemed to experience regarding her need for tutoring and her expectation for passing her upper level courses. Kofu, who had already mentioned his resistance to going to tutors for help and his inclination to work on his own, pointed out the mixed message that some students receive from teachers of the upper level courses:

In Written Communication I and II, [the teachers] are going to know who is going to do well in Writing and Literature I and II. Because you can’t really depend on the tutors. They expect you to learn and to act on your own. And for a professor who doesn’t recommend for you to go to the tutor, then what is the point of being in
Writing and Literature I and II? But maybe you won’t learn anything if you keep on going to the tutors. Maybe the professors are overlooking your weaknesses. Now, speaking for myself, I don’t depend on the tutor as often. I do know that in Writing and Literature I and II, you’re required to do a lot of research and investigation and writing and reading, but I do a lot of that investigation on my own time.

Moses said, “That’s true. I would have to agree with you.” Then Sami responded: You make a good point. The student needs to be self-motivated and know where their weaknesses are in whatever course they are taking. And, once they figure out their weakness, whether it be structure, syntax or whatever, then they need to take advantage of the Written Communication courses, and during those courses become strong on those things. And then in Writing and Literature I and II, they can work on their own, and then their weaknesses will be much less and they will be able to solve those problems.

In this comment, Sami reveals that she perceives a pathway for students to acquire and improve their skills on a continuum with assistance that enables them to ultimately achieve independence and success in their English courses.

**THE ROLE OF DEAF PEERS**

The focus of these interviews was on participants’ experiences in English courses designated specifically for deaf students. Naturally, comments on those experiences involving deaf classmates came up during the interviews. In some cases, deaf peers sharing experiences helped mitigate feelings of frustration and challenge, but in others, they seemed to create obstacles for the participants. Several students expressed frustration
with their deaf peers, some of them for reasons of lack of academic preparations, others for attitude problems.

**Academic Preparation and Maturity**

Some of the participants talked about their perception that certain deaf students simply were not academically prepared enough for college or were not mature enough to handle the personal and academic responsibilities that college work entails. Kaylee Wallin, the student who entered RIT at the equivalent of Freshman Composition (Writing and Literature I and II) and who prided herself on her strong English and literacy skills, was somewhat bored with her deaf peers in her English classes, but not with her hearing peers in her technical major (professional and technical communications):

I mean, if you watch the T.V. news, it is kind of boring, but you talk about it with twenty kids who all are interested in it, and some are so fun! And some of the interpreters that I have had are the best! Yes. They handle the interaction and really keep up. And you can see the passion and the interest, and they all want to be there. And they say it is worth getting up at 10 in the morning! I want to go to class, and I feel that I was so into that, but I wasn't like that with Writing and Lit II. There wasn’t much discussion about... well, we would talk about articles or just discussion, and there were a lot of topics in Writing and Literature I and II. Things like abortion and affairs and political status, and I didn’t feel like I was really involved in the conversation. People wouldn’t catch what was being said. With my major, I’d never feel that way. I like being around hearing people better in terms of when it comes to learning about something. Hearing people. Oh, I recently found a group of people who talk about politics all of the time. Deaf people, and they are all freshmen. They
go to RIT and they see... oh, I love to get into the room with them every day because
I can talk to them about politics. I can talk to them about the death penalty. I can
talk to them about abortion, and they all have different points of view. And it is
great. I feel smarter every time I leave the room!

Kaylee explains that she felt engaged and challenged by her peers in her mainstream
classes, most of whom were hearing, but not by her deaf peers in her required English
course. She perceived that her peers in her English course were there only because they
were required to be, not because they had chosen to be, unlike the peers in her mainstream
courses, who were self selected. Kaylee seems to feel that she could learn more from
hearing people than from deaf people, possibly because she perceives her hearing peers to
have been exposed to more information and points of view that they then can share with
her. She also seems to perceive that her hearing peers were more engaged in their learning
experiences than her deaf peers were.

In the focus group discussion, Kaylee, who was a peer tutor at the time, addressed
several participants’ negative comments about their tutoring experiences by pointing out
her perception that many students who use tutoring services are not always invested in
their English improvement:

Listening to everyone saying that the NTID tutors don’t help. While I am on the staff
there, it seems like that is a lot to hear. But at the same time, there are a lot of things
that I have had to cope with. A lot of people come in last minute with stuff, and they
have things that need to be done, and class is in two hours. We have to hurry
through it, and oftentimes, I am sorry, but there are a lot of mistakes that I have
found within the structure and the grammar and the word choice and a lot of the
content. A lot of the meat. So, where do I start because there are so many? A lot of the time I don’t feel like the deaf really come in and take the time to set up what they want to say. I feel like while there are many students that are concerned about their learning experience, a lot of them are not. They just don’t care. Okay, here is my paper, fix it for me. That is what I feel that a lot of the students come in to me for. Maybe you all that are here are better than a lot of the NTID students that come. You have a better knowledge of your learning experience. That is why you are in this focus group, and you are focused on learning your English. But, a lot of them are not.

Kaylee describes what she said was a common occurrence, when deaf students would ask tutors at the last minute for extensive help on important assignments, and she judges this lack of planning negatively, describing this as a failure to engage in their own learning (“They just don’t care. Okay, here is my paper, fix it for me.”). Moises Jones responded to Kaylee’s observations during the focus group by sharing a similar experience, but concluding with a different concern:

Well, I would like to support what Kaylee just said and her feeling because sometimes I feel taken advantage of. People will come up and ask me for help, and I notice that some of those students if they come up and they ask for help and sure I don’t mind helping. But I feel that I am putting my Writing and Literature I and II skills and the vocabulary, all of the skills that I have into their lower level English courses writing paper. And, there is no place for me to put that down. There is no form like the NTID Learning Center. There is no documentation of where they are getting help from. The teacher needs to improve their investigation of how they
notice student writing is improving dramatically, and yet they are not going to the Learning Center. So, that is why, in secret they are coming to me, and I feel taken advantage of, and I kind of have blown them off and said just forget it.... if I put my changes on their writing, it is going to be at my level of writing which is going to give their teacher a false impression or it might make them suspicious. And, or, they might be promoted up to a higher English class that they are not ready for.

This story of Moises reveals the efforts that some students will make to ensure their papers will earn passing grades. He is not necessarily accusing these students of cheating, but he makes the point that in every situation where one person helps another, the risk of the helping person’s work overshadowing the original student’s work is very real. Kaylee responded to Moises’ story from a different angle:

I think that is very funny because I mean, how are you going to get a good grade then? If they give a paper of their own work, the teacher is going to look at it and give it a C or give it a D. Then they are going to go to the tutor and get the help to fix the grammar and everything and the structure and then what? And, the teacher goes, this is not your own work. Because I gave you a C. I gave you a D. So, how do you... what do you do?

In her response, Kaylee touches on a thorny issue that both students and teachers confront, particularly in situations where the students demonstrate nonstandard English in their initial writing and then attempt to improve it with help from others, challenging the teachers to determine what a fair grade for such improvement would be.

Kofu Brown chimed in soon after this exchange with his own experience watching students not putting in what he considered to be enough work on their papers:
I have noticed a lot of the deaf students who don’t put a lot of effort into their work. They tend to just kind of slough things off until it is right at the last minute, and then they go to the tutor, and they ask for the tutor to help and fix and modify their stuff. And I feel like that is cheating if they pass because they are not learning anything. They are learning nothing. And I think they really need to analyze their motivation about that they really want to learn something and we need to encourage them to put the effort in on their own time. Because if you don’t, it won’t work.

In this assessment, Kofu shares Moises’ view that sometimes students are too dependent on others for help, preventing them from learning and improving on their own. He feels that they are not participating in achieving the academic English literacy skills they need to progress through the English course sequence and beyond. Like Kaylee, Kofu preferred classes with hearing students:

With the hearing class, the number of students was no problem. There was no problem in the hearing class because every one of us stayed on focus and focused on the teacher. The teacher explained, and we might ask why, why this rule or that and why you can’t use this or that? And the teacher would pass out essays to help us understand. We would read those over, and in that class I read a lot of essays. But, with the deaf class, they tended to focus on students’ weaknesses over and over and over again. And it is like we were focusing on one topic through the whole quarter. Kofu felt that the emphasis in his classes with deaf students was not on the content or the subject, but rather on bringing his weaker peers up. He felt that his time in those classes was not used to his best benefit, and Kaylee made a similar remark about her
perception that teachers focused on the weakest students in the course rather than challenging the entire class (see Chapter 6).

Like Kofu, Jackie Frieda remarked in her interview that she felt her classmates were wasting her time by not paying attention in class and then asking the teacher to repeat points already covered:

Yeah, because they don’t really put their effort into it. I understand the English sentence is very important. They just look around, and then they ask the teacher again and again and again. I’m like “pay attention. I’m not here to waste my time.” That has nothing to do with English, but . . . .

Jackie wanted to use her time efficiently in class so she could move forward and progress through the course, and she felt that her classmates were hindering that process. Sami noted certain courses where students did not engage fully in the course or with the teacher:

And, some of the students had a pretty bad attitude in that class. I mean, they made all sorts of facial expressions. You could just see it on their face. And, some of them just disengaged and didn’t pay attention at all. Some of these students would struggle to lip read that teacher and then share the information with the rest of us. But it was really disheartening. And, you know a lot of the students just accepted it passively. They said they had to stay because their advisor told them they had just no choice. So, they stayed passively, and they didn’t assert their rights. I mean, they were first-year students and pretty passive. So, just put up with it.

This situation that Sami describes seems to be one manifestation of the phenomenon that Moises Jones described in Chapter 4, where he discussed the response of
certain students to their placement in courses. Students sometimes passively accept their placement or the assessment of their skills by teachers (Kofu was an exception to this), which apparently discouraged them from advocating for themselves or even trying hard in class.

Mike Massa talked about realizing that some of his deaf peers had very different experiences with English than his. He was surprised to meet deaf students who apparently did not struggle with English even though they were deaf like him:

During my first year, I met a lot of interesting people. Some had English courses waived, and I thought wow! Some had taken AP English in high school. Some had reading waived, but their writing scores were low. There was a wide variety. So I would talk with them, but sometimes it was hard to understand because I was really good at ASL, and they were strong in English, and there would be miscommunication, communication breakdowns. I asked them how they got their English waived, and they said that they read a lot of books when they were young. I thought, oh, they read a lot, and I didn't do that. I didn't have that experience of how to write. And they told me some of their ideas, and I asked if they wanted to get together and compare notes, and we did, and we made outlines, and I would write my thing, and sometimes I would need more detail, and we would get feedback from one another.

Here Mike discusses collaborative learning experiences with his peers that he found helpful as well as strategies they had used that he had not. However, Mike also talked about his perception that some students weren’t willing to put forth the effort needed to improve their English and get better grades:
It seems that that student is resistant to change. They don’t want to change much. They are happy with where they are at. Some students when they get feedback or criticism from teachers feel that they don’t have time to change it, and they don’t care about English. They have been focusing on the courses in their major that are more important. And sometimes the paper just needs a lot of revision. If students feel they are not being respected, they should go to the teacher and find out what they marked up and why. If the student is not going to come to the teacher’s office, they are not going to learn where their mistakes are or what the teacher’s expectations are.

In this narrative, Mike reveals two common attitudes he has seen in his peers. The first is that of preferring to focus their energies on their major courses rather than English, perhaps because working on English is so difficult and challenging for them. The second is that getting feedback on their English is demoralizing or discouraging for some students, who avoid working with their teachers and therefore are not learning, according to Mike.

COMMUNICATION AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

As Mike noted, the range of skills and experience of deaf students in English courses is very wide. Sami Bradley talked about this at some length and put it in the context of cultural differences:

But I have also noticed that most of the students in general don’t really have good ASL skills. There is a whole variety of students; some are oral, some come from mainstreamed programs, a few from residential schools who tended to sign really well. Some didn’t know sign language at all. And students in the mainstreamed program had a whole variety of skills and that was a challenge. Some were passive.
Some I think had cultural conflicts with one another. Some seemed disengaged like Asian students in class didn’t seem to speak up as much. So, there were a whole variety of factors. So, my first year in college I focused mostly on my own progress, or I would get together with fellow students in very small groups and maybe two or three of us or just with one other student.

Deaf students come from a wide variety of backgrounds and are typically a minority within their own homes, so the range of social interaction and language use is unsurprising. As a group, deaf students tend to develop coherence during their time at college, but at the beginning of their careers, they have not yet made the transition from their home backgrounds to the college community, and this is what Sami observed.

**EXPECTATIONS FOR DEAF PEERS**

In revealing their experiences with their deaf peers in English courses, my participants also revealed expectations they held for their classmates and friends regarding how they handled their English courses and learning experiences. In many cases, these expectations reflected a higher standard than what seemed to actually take place, indicating aspirations and a desire to improve and continually do better. The concept of settling for less was familiar, but often rejected because participants perceived that such settling would mean a poorer quality of education and therefore of life. However, in some cases, “settling” could indicate acceptance of certain realities, such as having done the best one could or worked to the utmost of one’s abilities. Of all the participants, Mike Massa talked the most about his deaf peers and wanting to help them succeed as he had.
COLLABORATE WITH ONE ANOTHER

Collaboration was a theme that emerged in a variety of contexts and interviews. Sami Bradley, the strong ASL user, in particular hoped her classmates would collaborate with her to help them all succeed in class:

I would expect my classmates to show they were come eager to learn and ready to learn and recognize that English is a second language for all of us and deal with that. I expected that we would help one another learn collaboratively. That was my expectation.

But most of my classmates didn’t meet it. Most of them worked only independently and just worried about their own progress or their own grade. And once in a while, I would relate to someone or meet someone who wanted to work together, but not that often, and the whole group didn’t work together collaboratively. Once in a while, I would meet one student who wanted to work with me or might ask me to work with them. And I think that my classmates expected me to be involved with them as well, but in other ways I didn’t notice them expecting much from me at all. I guess during class discussions, there was participation, and sometimes if I missed something the teacher said, I would expect a student to help me out so that I could figure out what they said so that I could get in my notes, and we were comfortable doing that, especially with other students who signed ASL really well.

Sami hoped for greater collaborative support from her peers than she apparently received, but the reasons why this collaboration did not happen are not entirely clear. She does mention that students seemed to collaborate during class in keeping one another informed, particularly those who signed ASL as well as she did. Moises Jones also wanted
to collaborate with his peers in order to be able to succeed more easily because he felt this arrangement was mutually beneficial:

Being available for them to you know, help and support each other, bounce ideas off each other. And also, the teachers tend to never repeat directions or instructions so we help each other as we are watching the teacher. If anyone misses anything we fill in the blanks for one another. And participating in class, obviously and fully understanding the class or being able to help each other out to do better. I expected the same thing of them because you know, when the teacher is giving us directions, as soon as they get through with the first sentence, one of my weaknesses is, I tend to immediately start writing and look down, and I miss whatever they say after that. So, I’ll turn to a classmate, ask what did they say? And then I’ll fill in the blanks that way. So, I am hoping that they are there for me just as they are hoping that I am there to support them and we all work together. Communication. I know that many of the students have different styles of communicating; ASL, PSE, oral and so forth. And I expect them to find one way of communicating in common. There is homesign, body language, writing to interact and be there for one another if necessary.

Moises seems to have experienced more frequent and satisfactory collaboration with his classmates. The difference between Moises and Sami is that Sami considers herself an ASL user, and Moises is more flexible in his communication preferences, which may have contributed to his satisfaction in that he may have been more easily able to connect with a wider range of students than Sami.
Zara talked about focusing energies toward pooling resources and sharing perspectives for the purpose of everyone’s success in classes. Like deaf culture tends to be very direct. You’re right. You’re wrong. And I think that can be really demoralizing. Instead I think that it would help if people helped one another, if they collaborate more and tried to see everyone’s point of view where they could teach one another instead of depending on their professor all of the time. So, I mean, it is really stressful in class because there is only one hour, and it is such a short time. And you can’t learn everything from the teacher’s lecture. I mean, if you depend only on that, we will learn nothing. We need to help one another and work with one another and collaborate and work together. I like the idea of doing that.

Zara seems to echo Sami’s perspective that students do not collaborate as much as they could and that they would all benefit from working together more. Roxanne Flores also wanted support from her classmates, but she didn’t want to feel constantly obligated to participate in collaboration:

Classmates expect that others work harder than others so they could get answers. I noticed that sometimes. I can’t say that for all students, but several students that is my experience. However, there are some classmates that expect a lot of team work such as supports and help each other when needed. I find that very helpful, but sometimes I like to be very independent. I like others’ supports when I need it, such as when I’m not sure what to do or need an example of what we are supposed to do, but I don’t like to depend on others such as copying answers or copy the paper from others. That way I won’t learn anything.
The subtext of Roxanne’s comment is that some students are too dependent on others, particularly those who work hard and do well, but other students are more balanced in their expectations and contributions, which Roxanne prefers.

**Be Serious about School**

Mike Massa, who had entered college severely underprepared and who had worked hard for many years to improve his English, talked quite a bit about how he felt responsible for encouraging his peers to work hard in English and try their best to succeed:

And some other students, not only my friends, but other students really need help. And I try to give them my feedback, and I told them how I built my confidence and how I learned to do better. And they were really thankful. So, it does take a lot of practice. It doesn’t come that easily or quickly.

I never missed class for a long, long time. And I loved learning. I just love it. I would like to influence other students. Sometimes they don’t seem to be motivated, and I would try to give them influence from me so I try to encourage them. I know life is not easy for us; for anyone. And I would like to try to motivate them to work on their English skills and get on with life. And they can read everyday, the newspaper, television, magazines, bulletins. That skill is essential.

Mike’s touching soliloquy reveals his internalization of the notion that one must always strive to improve one’s English, especially if one expects to get ahead in life, and his efforts to inspire his fellow students reflects his desire for everyone to share this viewpoint and succeed as well. He feels he has found the route to success in the academic English system, and he wants to make sure his peers join him.
Mark Smith, the older returning student whose interest in English was minimal and limited to passing his courses and attaining a skill level sufficient for success at work, also talked about how he tried to encourage his classmates to do better than he had:

> I expected them to do better than me, that was in the past. I try to motivate them, encourage them to do good, for the real world. I had a good experience with that because I didn’t do well in the past, but since then I’ve learned a lot about the real world than when I was younger.

In this narrative, Mark explains that his real world experiences helped him appreciate and build on his education, and his work with his peers is intended to show them that similar efforts in school can pay off for them as well. Mark explained his own approach in his English classes:

> I listen and do homework! Most other people talk about jokes. I’m serious. They’re young, not older. Some don’t care. I’ve finished with English, I don’t have to worry about taking any more, so [throw away].

Mark essentially focused on what he needed to do to meet his English course requirements, something he felt many of his younger peers failed to do, to their detriment. But once he had completed his English requirements, he was ready to move on and focus on other things.

**Have a Positive Attitude**

Mike’s personal mantra for succeeding in his English courses was to have a positive attitude and not to take feedback negatively. These were two expectations he tried to communicate with his peers:
Some would give up, and I would tell them don’t give up. Try your best. Keep a
positive attitude, go to tutoring. I would encourage them to read everything before
and not wait until the last minute. Of course, they wouldn’t understand it as well. I
would try to always be prepared and plan in advance when I had to write a paper,
and it would come out fine. And they were surprised to hear that. And I told them,
yep, that is the way it works!

If a teacher didn’t like a paper, I told them, my classmates, don’t feel deflated. Don’t
feel put down by that. Try to revise it, follow what the teacher wants. Make
revisions. Clean up your work and make improvements.

At the same time Mike acknowledged the challenge and difficulty of English for his
deaf peers, he still believed that they should not focus so much on how hard English was for
them and instead should direct their thoughts and energies toward working to improve
their English.

RISE TO THE CHALLENGE

Deaf students arrive at RIT with varying levels of readiness for college. About half
present 7th or 8th grade reading levels, which is inadequate for college and which places
them in the remedial English course sequence. Kaylee Wallin felt that if deaf students were
accepted to college, they by default should already be prepared for college coursework:

I believe that everyone should be at the level they should be, especially in college.
But it’s selfish. I don’t wish that everyone is like me, no, but I believe that everyone
should have a 12th grade reading level when they come into college. Can write
coherently when they come into college. That’s selfish of me because not everyone
had parents like I had, the education I had, not everyone was as lucky as I was in terms of education.

Her comment that she considered this perception to be “selfish” was difficult for her to explain. She eventually concluded that she essentially wanted her deaf peers to be like her, a high-achieving deaf student, but she recognized that not all deaf students arrive in college with the same level of academic preparation and aptitude as she had. Nonetheless she still hoped for that, which she labeled as a “selfish” wish.

Zara Vitch talked about how her classmates brought different backgrounds to college, and how she felt they could all use this experience to grow and rise to the challenge of succeeding in college.

My classmates? What they expected from me was to understand their point of view, their perspective, their concepts and to help one another. We all have to go through knowing English and ASL both, and every deaf person learns English from their mistakes, their English mistakes. They need to change to learning and studying those mistakes and not ignoring them.

Zara’s comment is a positive one in which she expresses the idea that by working together, sharing experiences and support, and being open to learning, everyone could advance successfully.

Respect One Another

Like Zara, Jackie Frieda talked about recognizing the variety of backgrounds and experiences of each student, but she contextualized this in terms of respect.

The only thing they expect us is to respect one another, because every student have different education background. When I mean respect, English is our second
language, not everyone knows how to write English. There are some who are expert, and some who aren’t. I think they expect me to respect them as a person because after all, we are all deaf.

Jackie’s point dovetails with Sami’s earlier observation about the wide variety of backgrounds deaf students come from, but she emphasizes the importance of respecting individual experience whereas Sami focused on identifying students with whom she could communicate with and collaborate.

**PARTICIPATE IN Communicating**

The issue of effective communication in the classroom and beyond came up during several interviews. Participants valued the ability to communicate with their classmates and peers and seemed to feel that the more easily communication was able to take place, the more effective the learning environment. This was discussed at length in the other chapters with regard to teachers, but Roxanne remarked on her fellow students:

There are a variety of students’ communication needs. A lot of [students] are hard of hearing, but it doesn’t matter to me because they do sign, but some of them couldn’t. It was sometimes very frustrating to communicate with someone who can’t sign. Like for example, we were put in a group for a project. One of us couldn’t sign, one of us could sign well, and others were hard of hearing. How could we understand each other outside of class without an interpreter? It was pretty hard, but it is part of reality. We have to learn how to face the communication barrier.

Roxanne observed that the range of communication modes used by deaf students sometimes creates confusion, almost like a Tower of Babel, and she views this as an opportunity to develop common communication strategies to bring everyone together.
This opportunity also, in her mind, offered the chance to develop the ability to bridge communication gaps later in life, at work for example, where students might be the only deaf people there. Furthermore, her comment, “We have to learn how to face the communication barrier,” reveals her willingness to take responsibility for what really is a shared duty.

Sami speculated on the communication skills of students that were different than hers:

Sometimes I’ll wonder about some of the students who sign, but it is not ASL they sign, really a strongly English influenced signing. I wondered does that transfer to their English writing skills? Do they have really good English writing skills? Or some of the oral students, do they have strong English skills? At the same time people who are really native ASL-like signers do have strong English skills. So, I wonder about the relative strengths in each language. It depends on how they learned and how they acquired the language and their background experiences.

Sami’s inquiry reflects on her experience as an ASL user who has struggled her entire college career to gain proficiency in English. She naturally wonders whether the English-based signing that many students use translates to standard written English in their papers, but she also notes that some strong ASL users also have strong English skills, confirming that mastery of a first language helps with acquisition of a second language, although this has not been her experience.
CHAPTER 6
PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS, EXPECTATIONS, AND TEACHING METHODS

The previous chapters discussed the challenges and obstacles perceived by the participants in this study within the academic English system. Those challenges were of a more general and abstract nature, and this chapter focuses more specifically on one aspect of that system: the instructors. This chapter is the longest chapter in this dissertation because my participants had a great deal to say about their teachers, who played significant roles in their academic English literacy acquisition experiences.

A significant aspect of “school” is the interaction of students with their teachers. By definition, school is an experience wherein both students and teachers participate in a shared environment for the purpose of student development and learning. What actually happens varies widely, with experiences and reactions as individual as each student. Participants discussed their experiences with teachers and revealed perceptions related to teacher attitude, communication, and faith in students. Many of these perceptions were negative, very likely because teachers are considered to have the upper hand, the control or power in the academic English system and therefore are sometimes thought of as oppressors.

PREFERENCE FOR DEAF TEACHERS

At this college, some of the faculty are deaf, but the majority are hearing. Many participants preferred their deaf teachers. Reasons for this preference ranged from clear communication, effective instruction, shared experiences, and cultural affinity. Sami Bradley said:
I think that it was a cultural difference because when I worked with a deaf teacher, things went great. And then with hearing teachers in the English classes, there were a bunch of conflicts.

Another participant, John Doe, talked about how he perceived the involvement or “connection” of teachers with students in his classes. He remarked that if he felt his teacher was not connected with the students somehow, his own motivation to work in that class was weakened:

Some teachers are cool, open-minded, personal involvement, which would show motivation. Some teachers, who have a straight face, show no bonding with the students. It just depends on the teachers, the students, and the class environment. There were classes that I enjoyed and others, I didn’t. Depending on the teachers, I think.

He added that he perceived a stronger connection by deaf teachers with deaf students.

For example, a deaf teacher, who teaches English. She’s very expressive, very visual, communicative, while comparing to a hearing teacher, who’s very plain, strict communicative, assigns homework. It is not warm, cold. That is why lately, not only deaf teachers specifically. There are some hearing teachers who could very well be expressive. Some are good, and some just different.

John credited deaf teachers with a greater tendency to connect with their students, who also happen to be deaf, but he did say that hearing teachers could successfully bond with students in ways that brought them together.
Sami Bradley also enjoyed her deaf teachers as well as one teacher she labels a CODA, which is a child of deaf adults, a hearing person whose parents are deaf.

I had one deaf teacher and then one CODA and then another deaf teacher, and I really enjoyed that because they could show things visually, and they would explain their presentations. With some of the classes, teachers would just write on the board, but in Lit, I had teachers who could relate what they were teaching to the deaf experience. For example, in one Lit course, with a deaf teacher, they were explaining about the pearl. A woman found a beautiful pearl in an oyster or something. And they said it would be the same as if a deaf person found something gold or something they cherished. And they would use analogies that made it much more understandable. And the deaf students could have access to the information. I think that even the oral students were surprised that they learned so much from that method of teaching. And it was really enjoyable.

Sami felt that her deaf teachers taught in a way that was more effective for her as a student, and she explains:

Because I felt more comfortable with the deaf teachers because we had shared background. Yeah! And I felt that they respected my level of English, and they helped me better....They helped me better related to their method of instruction, which was influenced by their deafness. They taught by example. They did more expansion. It was visually accessible.

Sami comes from a family with deaf parents and a deaf sister, and she describes ASL as her first language. She began her college career in one of the lower remedial classes and struggled to get through the system over a period of years. Her remark, “I felt that they
respected my level of English," indicates an underlying message that she perceived herself as primarily an ASL user whose English skills were not at the level expected by her instructors, and she seems sensitive about this.

Joseph Goino shared Sami’s experience with deaf teachers:

My favorite is Analysis of Literature. Why? Because there was a deaf teacher in it. And he used ASL. And I understood clearly. It was a fascinating course. To me, I felt that we were really speaking the same language. I really liked it a lot.

For Joseph, his deaf teacher made the course more accessible and interesting, and he felt able to engage with the material and consequently felt empowered with the progress he perceived in that course.

Zara Vitch connected with one deaf teacher based on shared experiences and common cultural values, and this relationship encouraged her and gave her inspiration:

Before that experience, I had no idea about deaf role models or deaf people who were successful in college or teachers. I had never seen deaf role models. I mean, I had seen articles about deaf people in the paper and stuff or written articles, but I had never met someone myself, and this was the first person that I met who might be a role model until I got here, and for the first time I met one in my class. And this was a person who understood me, and I understood her, and I felt this shared experience. We could talk about so many things, and I enjoyed talking about them. And I felt boy, I want to be like that person in the future! Successful academically. It was a wise woman, and this person gave me a little more motivation to succeed in school, and I realized why I am here. And of course, she majored in English, and I got to talk about a lot of things with her, and I would sometimes talk about math,
and she was a little bit lost, but it was interesting. It was interesting to see that every person has oh, maybe a field they are better at and a field that they are not as good at. And this is kind of how I learned her perspective on how to learn better. We had this shared experience, and I mean this person that I worked with, with signing things, and she was the one who could write them down, and that is where I used that strategy. I said English is terrible! How could you do well in English? And it wasn’t funny. She really struggled with English. And she let me know that a lot of people before me had struggled, but they had done well and succeeded, and that was a relief to know.

In this narrative, Zara discusses her feelings about finding someone she perceived as a kindred spirit, someone who also had struggled with English, but had succeeded in the end, a goal that Zara sought. She expresses her sense of relief at realizing that each individual has strengths and weaknesses in school and careers. Then, in a side remark, she mentions a strategy she liked, where she would sign her material, and this teacher would write it down for her, essentially transcribing for her. For Zara, this strategy and relationship felt empowering. She also commented that she perceived her hearing teachers as looking down on her and other deaf students:

And, well, this is from my own experience, with deaf professors I felt really comfortable. There was a rapport, and when they taught, I could understand their examples. And they knew how to teach deaf students. Some of the hearing professors would either look down at us or were patronizing us, or it seemed like they picked on our mistakes. And it wasn’t as pleasant.
Zara seems to have felt accepted by the deaf teachers, not the hearing teachers, therefore she was more willing to accept feedback and criticism from her deaf teachers than from her hearing teachers. This slight antagonism arose with other participants (Sami Bradley in particular) and seems to be a result of conflicting expectations on the part of the students and the teachers. In cases where students felt unable to understand or succeed, they also felt powerless and oppressed, and this experience seemed to occur most often with hearing teachers.

**LOW EXPECTATIONS**

Several participants discussed their perception that instructors generally held deaf students’ skills and potential for improvement in low estimation. Kofu Brown analyzed his experience at RIT, where he felt that his teachers did not trust students’ evaluations of their own skills. He mentions the negative effect of this perception on his motivation in his RIT English classes.

Kofu arrived at RIT from another college that also has a large deaf population and strong programs for deaf students. At first, after he took the initial writing course placement test and was placed in a lower writing course, he was open to feedback and was willing to work on improving his English. After some time, however, he began to feel that his teachers’ assessment of his skills was wrong. He based this comparison on his experience at his previous school, where he felt challenged.

Since I went to a mainstreamed school, I mean I was challenged and I learned a lot, but as a student here at RIT, with English courses, many times as I am doing the work, I feel that it is watered down. Well, maybe not watered down. Watered down might not be the right word, but I feel like I am not learning anything. I feel like I am
not learning anything, and the teachers assume that we have weaknesses in English, and they can’t see how I really feel. And since I took that course, that caused me to lose my motivation. And that is why I didn’t do well in school because I mean there was no one that I could talk to who really believed me. Nobody really believed in me based upon what? On the test I took. And sometimes I’d take those tests, and I wasn’t really serious, but I did work to confront my mistakes, and I went ahead and took an English course here at RIT/NTID. And I thought that maybe I could improve because there was a lot of professional staff who were telling me that I should take that course and improve my English structure and so forth. So I went ahead and took the course, and I was sitting there listening to the rules, and they explained the structure and the grammar and so forth. And I was sitting there watching, and I started to realize that I was in the wrong class.

Kofu’s comment, “the teachers assume that we have weaknesses in English,” indicates his perception that the teachers have low expectations for the students, and he explains that this perception created a barrier for him as he attempted to progress through the academic English system. He tells us that his teachers relied on the results of tests, some of which he admitted not taking carefully, rather than listening to him in determining his course placement. He felt that his right to control his destiny was denied in this situation.

Another participant who discussed her boredom and lack of motivation in her English classes was Kaylee Wallin. She shared her perception that teachers teach to the weakest deaf student in class, which created an unchallenging classroom experience for her.
Oh, I do think that the teachers try their best, but like you obviously know, really each deaf student is different. And I know that there is not really a way to group students so that they are all at the same level. I understand that. So I think that what the teacher does is find the least prepared student and teach to that level, so no one misses anything. That is my perspective, and I understand it, I do. I mean, what else can they do?

Kaylee also expressed a dim view of how some hearing teachers treat deaf students. Her perception was that hearing teachers who teach deaf sections are more rigid and inflexible than teachers of regular sections of the same course:

One of my friends, he was in my Writing and Lit II class, and he got mono. Now, he said that if he was in a regular mainstreamed course, he could have just written four essays, attendance was not mandatory. So he could have communicated with the teacher and said okay, I want to do the four papers on my own, and then he would be able to get through the course. But with the NTID section, they told him well, he would have to drop it because it just took too much time. Now, it is an RIT class. He had to do rough drafts and papers in the ten classes, and that was all mandatory because the teachers wanted the students to do that. And that is fine, but he had mono and the other Writing and Lit courses, offered at RIT, you don’t have to do that. So he was going to fail. So he had no choice. He told me that if he were in a mainstreamed class, he could have just written the papers and done fine. But being in an NTID section, he couldn’t. So, he had to withdraw, or he would fail the class, and the teacher wasn’t sympathetic.
Naturally, Kaylee sympathized with her fellow student’s perception of unfair treatment. Remember, she was the student who began her first interview with the statement, “You are not allowed to register for the hearing classes. You have to register with the teacher for deaf students.” This choice limitation strongly influenced her assessment of her friend’s situation, which she thought was discriminatory in that because he was deaf, he was stuck with a class that had excessively rigid expectations, whereas other students had more freedom and latitude to choose.

**Teacher Rigidity**

Some participants shared their perceptions that some teachers were excessively controlling and inconsiderate of students. This behavior on the part of the teachers was considered patronizing and obstructive, and the participants were particularly sensitive to this given the difficulties they felt they had to overcome to progress through the academic English system. Moises Jones talked about classroom rules that he felt were demeaning and unnecessary:

Last week I had this two-hour class, and the teacher locked the door. Let me explain more clearly. We had this two-hour class, and there was a five-minute break in the middle. And I went downstairs to get a drink, and when I came back upstairs, the door was locked on me. Well, that kind of thing ought to not happen. And other rules like that they ought to just get rid of. Because those silly rules are an obstacle to students’ learning and becoming successful.

When Moises says, “Those silly rules are an obstacle to students’ learning and becoming successful,” he clearly resents this kind of behavior on the part of teachers.
Kaylee Wallin also criticized teachers whom she felt imposed arbitrary and pointless requirements on students, particularly regarding writing assignments:

I had Dr. K and Toscano, and they were what I heard should be the best lit teachers in the deaf department. So I feel I got lucky. But the others, old, use the same materials over and over, with really strict and weird requirements of what they wanted from the students. I read them, the assignment requirements, they don’t give students freedom, they want a certain way of written essay. I understand, you have your requirements, but this is Writing and Lit I and II, and they should give students some flexibility in that kind of writing, but they followed specific requirements or not a good paper.

Kaylee felt that her own teachers were effective, but she thought that other teachers were less innovative and creative in working with students. She felt that teachers should offer a framework for students to work with, but also not limit students to that framework, allowing them to go beyond it in exploration of expanding their skills. In addition, she made this point in the context of the higher-level writing course, indicating that she expected the teachers to give students in that course credit for their skill and experience and respect for their potential.

Kaylee also shared an experience where a teacher reminded her of very specific protocol she was expected to follow if she needed to miss class.

Unsympathetic toward, they wanted the best, they wanted students to meet the requirements. And if you didn’t, they didn’t care what the reason was unless you were laying on your deathbed. I missed class because I was in the hospital, and the teacher was like [face]. I emailed her, she said give me proof, I said fine, fine, my
roommate went to the hospital and got all the papers to prove I was there, and the teacher said fine and excused my absence. Require proof. Then later she said, how do you feel? I feel fine medically. She said ok, I want to talk to you outside of class, come here. She said, I'm sorry you don't feel well, because I emailed her that I was in the hospital, the doctor had a note saying bed rest 2 or 3 days, take it easy, fine, I emailed that. She said, until you give me proof that you have a doctor's note and that you have a hospital record, I'm going to record your absence. Whoa. The tone was not harsh, but it could have been interpreted as, she was just being a teacher, and she wasn't leaving room to be fooled. I understood a lot of students have done that before, I was in the hospital last night and couldn't finish my essay. I know but I guess maybe she felt she came off too harsh, but no, not completely. At first I was a little, whoa, whatever, okay, but I expected that, I never expected leeway from the teacher. I hope I will get it, but expect, no. I was sick and told the teacher I can't come to class, and the teacher said later, I don’t care what the reason is, I don’t care until you have verification of that from Student Health Center, from the hospital, whatever. Fine. The teacher was not mean, but because I was first year, I guess she didn't want me to feel intimidated, but she did want me to know she needed proof, she had been fooled before, okay fine, feel better? Yes thank you, okay fine, then I went into class. She didn't want to scare me, and I said fine. So.

Kaylee understood that her teacher was enforcing rules that had been set at the beginning of the quarter, but she was a little nonplussed by the teacher's insistence on discussing the matter even though Kaylee had already followed the proper procedures. She seemed to perceive this teacher's behavior as slightly patronizing.
GRAMMAR AS A PROBLEM

Deaf students as a group exhibit a variety of difficulties with English grammar. The grammar written by most deaf students typically is not standard English, which then becomes a large issue for deaf students in college, especially in their English classes. The topic of teachers’ fixation with English grammar came up frequently. Participants generally expressed negative reactions to this focus they found in their experiences with many of their English teachers. John Doe mentioned his experience with this phenomenon in the courses he took with hearing teachers of deaf students. When he refers to “Liberal Arts,” he is talking about teachers of mainstreamed classes:

I remember when I took Written Com II, Writing Literature I & II. The teachers picked on us for grammar errors, the way English rules are. Liberal Arts are a little more flexible. They do pick on grammar, but mostly focused on what we learned in that course.

John explains that in his deaf-only English classes, the same ones Kaylee complained about, the instructors spent a great deal of time trying to correct students’ grammar, whereas in subsequent mainstreamed liberal arts courses, instructors seemed interested primarily in the ideas and concepts that students wrote and less in their grammar.

Kofu Brown was particularly emphatic in his evaluation that this emphasis affected his learning experiences negatively:

They just keep emphasizing grammar. Because once one person might miss something in class, and then they will just repeat it over and over and over again. I felt things were going so slowly! I mean once we understand something, they should move on to new information. But it seemed like they kept going over and
over the same information, maybe for two or three weeks before they would finally move on to a new topic. So, I felt that we were progressing really slowly.

Here they keep focusing on grammar and structure over and over again. And if they keep focusing on grammar, then that is not the class where I belong because I don't see any improvement. It is just not for me. Structure, maybe yes. But that is not what I am interested in taking, you know?

Kofu felt that grammar was not an important area for him to focus on improving, and he resented the insistence of the teachers on working with grammar rather than on other more useful areas that would enable him to progress through the English system.

One participant who felt that his grammar had contributed to his low grades in his English courses was Joseph Goino:

But still, I want to improve my grammar, and I have difficulty with grammar. You know, I think that I am doing well, and the teachers tell me no. A lot of teachers have told me that grammar is what I need to work on. But I need help with grammar. And I'll go home and do the homework, and that is still my weakness. And I'll go home and do the homework and they tell me, your weakness is grammar!

The subtext of Joseph's comment is that his teachers emphasize grammar as his main area of weakness even in the face of his perceived improvement in other areas, which he found discouraging.

Mike Massa shared a similar perception that his grammar had hurt his grades in his English courses, despite all the work he put into it.
I don’t remember the grades, but I know that I passed all of the tests. I wished I had gotten A’s on all of them, but I think I usually got B’s or C’s. I am not sure. And grammar was the primary reason.

Sami Bradley talked about how a deaf teacher made the English grammar accessible to her, unlike her hearing teachers, who were unsympathetic and unsupportive:

Well, at NTID, I had a course with a deaf teacher, and that was great because what they were saying was visually accessible when they signed it. For example, they would show water. Well, for example, in newspaper, drop a newspaper, and they would ask what that meant, and I would say that means drop! They said sure, but now if you are talking about that an hour later, you need to say dropped and add the “ed” to signify past tense. That is how the English grammar works.

In the RIT class [with hearing instructor], they would write something on the board, and I would raise my hand and tell them what I thought it meant, and they said, no, no, no, that is not what it meant. And I started to realize that the English had different rules, grammatical rules. When I write, there is a strong visual component because ASL is my first language. And then I have to translate it to English. And the teacher would often misunderstand that. So I would have to explain what I meant, and I would meet with them one-to-one, and they said well, that NTID English course didn’t have high expectations. So, what they expected from students was a little bit different, and the RIT classes, the English teachers were much less receptive to meeting with me and accommodating my needs.

In this situation, Sami is differentiating between two groups of teachers, NTID teachers and RIT teachers. Both teach deaf students, but Sami is communicating a
perception that the teachers were more willing to work with her and the skills she brought to her NTID classes (the four-course writing sequence) than her instructors in the pre-baccalaureate writing courses (Written Communication I and II), even though both groups of instructors can sign and communicate directly with deaf students.

In her second interview, Sami elaborated a bit on her perceptions of teacher expectations for students’ grammar and the effects of these expectations on the students, which seemed to be influenced by where the students were currently studying in the English course system:

Some of the teachers at the NLC or some of the RIT instructors may look at the English and say okay, that’s good enough. And some of the NTID people may correct it and edit it much more aggressively. I mean, I understand that it is a deaf college, and the English teachers have high expectations and want to push the deaf students to improve their English skills. So, they may grade even more strictly. At the same time, the students may get really turned off by that because they feel like they are always doing it wrong. In the RIT classes, they may be more motivated to learn and pick up more. I think that it depends on the students’ attitudes as well. It is an open question. I mean, I hear from some students that the RIT teachers are really strict. Some say they are easy. I hear from other students that the NTID teachers are really strict or really easy. But, I think that the teachers need to find some way to express their expectations so that the students know what they expect.

This narrative from Sami reveals that students have different experiences within this academic English system, frequently based on their level of skill with English grammar. Students who are more skilled with English tend to find the system less challenging than
those who struggle with English. And those who struggle with English receive more feedback on their grammar, which they in turn perceive as negative criticism, even though they intellectually understand that the teachers are trying to help them improve.

**TEACHER COMMUNICATION**

The issue of communication with teachers came up during various interviews with different participants. Some participants addressed the issue from the language standpoint, and others discussed it from the listening standpoint. Communication breakdowns or misunderstandings from the language standpoint resulted from what several participants considered to be poor receptive skills on the part of teachers, reflecting their inability to understand their students, or teachers’ poor expressive skills, resulting in students’ inability to understand what their teachers were signing. Other comments addressed whether teachers truly listened to what their students were trying to tell them.

Jackie Frieda talked about her view that students and teachers needed to be well matched in terms of their communication skills, with teachers bearing more responsibility for proficiency in sign language so that their students could understand them.

I think it’s very important the students understand their teachers. If the students don’t understand their communication, then they will struggle. That’s why I think it’s important that the teacher is able to communicate with the students. Then the students will be able to understand English. Communication means signing style, because a lot of students have their own upbringing of signing. ASL or PSE or whatever, but the teacher probably just learned English signing. Grew up English, hearing world, whatever, but then just learned sign language, so they’re kind of a little rusty, and I think that loses the motivation of the students and feel frustrated
and.... I see that a lot. I see that a lot. I think I would like to see the teacher improve on their signing.

Despite Jackie’s hope that teachers and students would be properly matched, she observed that most teachers are not competent enough at sign language to teach effectively and do not demonstrate improvement over time.

Kofu observed a certain rigidity in teachers’ approaches in the classroom, not unlike Kaylee’s perception already discussed. Kofu perceived that these teachers had some set script for their pedagogy, and they refused to deviate from it even when students explicitly requested such shifting.

A lot of the teachers, well the problem is, I think, the teachers fail many students because of the teachers’ communication with the students. They don’t really listen to us. For example, I noticed one student would keep raising their hand. And the teacher said well, you are right, but you still have to do that anyway. And I felt that the student was looking for a challenge. It was like the teacher couldn’t challenge us for some reason. Many of the students felt that the course wasn’t challenging enough. It was watered down. The teacher was repetitious, but they didn’t really prepare and plan. One class had about ten students, and eight students failed. So, either there is something wrong with the students or with the teacher!

Here, Kofu explains that the students specifically asked for more challenging materials, but the teacher would not comply, and in the end, most of the students failed, which reflected a communication breakdown in Kofu’s mind.

Sami talked at length about the differences in communication between her deaf teachers and her hearing teachers:
Yeah. With the hearing instructors, they gave us articles and really focused on English, and I mean, it was all word, word, word. They would write a sentence on the board, and then they would sign it and say, this is the rule. This is a verb and how verbs work. And I would pay attention, and they would write on the board and say here is the homework. And everything was in written English on the board, often. I guess that is why I felt more comfortable with the deaf teachers. It was more accessible. Also, sometimes the deaf teachers would just sign without vocalizing. And the hearing teachers would say, well, I have got to speak at the same time in SIMCOM. And the students would just kind of get distracted or find it hard to pay attention. And it affected our motivation. Well, it certainly affected my motivation. Plus, the hearing teachers tend to follow the book, the textbook. They would follow the book really closely. There were no other options.

In this narrative, Sami touches not only on the communication issue, but also on certain teachers’ rigidity in their methods of instruction. When she mentions SIMCOM, she is referring to simultaneous communication, which essentially means to speak and sign at the same time. This method of visual communication tends to follow English word order, which is an entirely different syntax than ASL and can be confusing for students to understand if their primary language is ASL, as Sami’s is. Research has shown that this type of contact signing tends not to be performed well (see (LaSasso & Metzger, 1998), which creates a whole host of problems, several of which Sami notes.

Furthermore, the whole issue of access to information in the classroom is brought to bear when students cannot understand their teachers and therefore do not retain what they should learn in those teachers’ courses. Sami said, “Now, the information from that
class with the hearing teacher who did not sign at all, I found that I forgot all of that. But, in
the course where we had a lot of discussion, I remembered all of the content and that was
interesting.”

Zara Vitch was blunt in her assessment of her teachers’ signing skills:
When I came in, I was shocked. The teachers would be there signing, but it wasn’t
very intelligible. It was like misarticulated, and I asked them how long have you
worked here? The teacher said that they have worked here 25 years. And I went
what? Twenty five years, and you still can’t sign fluently! I mean, I thought that
they would be clear and fluent with sign production like deaf people. But they
weren’t, and it seemed like the largest percentage of the professors were hearing.
There were only a few deaf professors. And I thought where are the deaf
representatives? And I think that it is a conflict for the hearing professors. I mean, I
understand the concept of teaching deaf students, but they haven’t got the
internalized experience. The deaf professors have already grown up being deaf and
can draw on their own experiences and teach the students.

Zara felt that the signing skills of these hearing instructors was inadequate for
effectively teaching their deaf students. She felt that deaf instructors naturally would be
more effective at teaching because of their communication skills and their shared
experiences. Roxanne Flores was similarly disappointed with the poor signing skills of
some of her teachers:

Some teachers couldn’t sign that well, which makes me frustrated. I am paying for
college and if they couldn’t sign that well, why don’t we get an interpreter? No- they
tell us that the teacher can sign, therefore no interpreter. That pretty much sucks.
Roxanne felt that she was not getting her tuition money’s worth when she had classes where she could not understand the instructors. Being denied an interpreter in these situations only made her feel even more discouraged about the challenge of succeeding in such classes, making the process of navigating the academic English system more difficult.

Sami talked not only about her teachers’ expressive sign language skills, which she described as unclear for her, but also their receptive skills, which were not adequate for understanding what she had to say and which severely influenced her experiences in those courses:

I mean I passed. I made it through by the skin of my teeth. The teacher was a nice person, but the teaching methods didn't work for me; all lecture like that. And they couldn't understand me when I signed. I would raise my hand to participate, and the teacher didn't have enough receptive skills to understand what I was saying. So, I did all the homework. I turned it in, and I got a passing grade. I mean, I did pass.

The teacher couldn't understand me. I really struggled. The students who vocalized, the teacher could understand. I mean, I am an assertive student. I am a deaf student, but I am assertive, and I would raise my hand and try to participate. It just didn’t work.

Sami’s efforts to participate in this academic English system were thwarted by her teacher’s inability to understand her and include her contributions in the course. She comments that the teacher could understand the deaf students who spoke, but not her.

Kofu Brown shared an experience similar to Sami’s, where he felt that the hearing teacher did not understand him or his questions:
I was not able to ... they weren’t able to satisfy my needs. If I would communicate with the professor, they wouldn’t understand my sign language or I wouldn’t understand their sign language. So, I would raise my hand. Could you tell me that again? Maybe they were distracted or maybe their signs were significantly different than what I am used to.

I am used to having an interpreter. I am very acclimated to having an interpreter or real-time captioning work in there. So, many times in the hearing class, remember I don’t have any problem. I can’t remember having a problem in a hearing class. I am able to understand everything comfortably, what was going on.

And I was always quite satisfied with that, but working with that instructor [in the deaf section of the RIT English course] and the way that they signed and how they taught English, it presented quite a struggle for me to understand. And if I asked something, they wouldn’t follow-up with my question. So, I had to give up or I just had to wait until the class was over, and then the two of us would meet one-on-one to talk about it so I could catch up. I wanted to catch up with what you were saying there. And it was like sort of hit and miss.

But my classmates, they wanted to talk about... the information that they wanted to discuss was different. I wanted to talk about the writing or captioning. Not just perceiving sign language. So, I tried to inform my teacher about our communication strategies, and if I wanted to say something, they would just ignore me. I felt that perhaps because I sign too fast or perhaps maybe they didn’t really expect to understand my signs. If I didn’t understand their signs, instead of asking something I would try to get them to clarify it. Well, I assumed that my signs would be clear. But
it is very easy to understand me, I think, but you know, they would like guess. They would miss what I was trying to say so I thought that maybe I was signing too fast for them. I don’t know why. I guess I can’t expect them to understand my signs all of the time. But they keep asking me to repeat, and I would understand that, but the frustration. That is one of the frustrations that I had. That was quite a struggle.

In this long narrative, Kofu explains that he and his instructor didn’t understand each another, which led Kofu to comment on positive communication experiences where he had worked with interpreters and felt able to keep up in those classes. Then he revisits the same instructor and tells us that not only did the instructor tend not to follow up with Kofu’s questions during class, Kofu would need to wait until the end of class in order to be assured of enough time and attention to clarify his questions. He also elaborated on the actual communication process he experienced with this instructor, where he tried to explain his point of view and suggest strategies to the instructor, who apparently was still unable to understand him and therefore could not work with him to improve the situation. All of this frustrated Kofu, intensifying his sense of struggle in this academic English system.

As Sami explained earlier, her primary language is ASL. Moises Jones, on the other hand, considered English to be his primary language, and his experience with teacher communication was quite different from Sami’s. He reported positively on his interactions with his teachers:

And they are very, very patient. For example, there are two students who use southern, a really strong ASL, and they don’t tend to accommodate any of the other students. Often the teacher will have to ask them to repeat, and they have to put up
with that. And the other students will help each other figure out what they are saying. But that teacher has a lot of patience.

In this narrative, Moises is describing communication facilitation, an unspoken responsibility of teachers. A phenomenon that also takes place in the NTID classrooms, where the students are all deaf, and teachers use sign language to provide direct instruction, is when teachers serve as interpreters for students who do not understand sign language. Moises remarked on when this took place in his course:

Most of the time, the teacher catches what the students are saying. And sometimes they will hold things up for a second, and they will mouth things to the oral students and give them a chance to lip-read what he is saying or respond to them and then move on.

In this situation, unlike in Sami’s situation where she was not understood by her teacher, this teacher apparently understands the students and is able to facilitate communication. Moises specifically said:

I told you that the teachers have a lot of patience, and they always find a way to promote interaction in the classroom.

Like Moises, Kaylee considers English to be her primary language, and like him, she didn’t perceive any communication problems in her English courses:

I don’t think any of the kids in class had difficulty understanding the teachers, no. The teachers used PSE, mixed so all of them understood. I know they voiced for themselves too because of oral students in the class. A lot of teachers are very communicative in terms of homework and essays, they’d write a lot of comments. They had no problems with feedback.
In Kaylee’s comment, “PSE” refers to pidgin signed English, a label for a variety of sign language commonly used in classrooms. It seems that the participants who did not experience communication difficulties with their teachers did not perceive other students having communication difficulties, indicating that one’s viewpoint is influenced by one’s experiences.

CULTURAL CONFLICTS

Culture includes communication, and much has already been said about participants’ experiences with teacher and student communication in the classroom. This issue, for some participants, went beyond simple language comprehension and touched on personal boundaries, reflecting cultural conflicts between hearing teachers and deaf students. Sami seemed to experience the most conflict in a number of areas with her English instructors, particularly if they were hearing. She told a very detailed narrative about her experiences in the Written Communication course sequence. She had a positive experience with her Written Communication I teacher, but not with the Written Communication II teacher, even though both were hearing and could sign:

Now, the RIT courses, I took Written Communication I, and that was the hearing teacher who signed really, really well, and there was a lot of interaction and the new deaf culture, and I really learned a lot. And the articles were about topics like sports or education or related to theater and other topics and were pretty accessible, and the students took that seriously. I mean, some were disengaged or passive, but most of us had a really good experience. Plus, the teacher gave us opportunities to present as well. And I think that people in general, the students had a really good
attitude and were eager to learn and eager to participate in class and were able to get a lot of good feedback. So I remember that course well.

In this case, we see that Sami perceived her Written Communication I teacher as having connected with the students and developed a shared experience in which all could participate effectively. This was not the case in her Written Communication II course:

Then this other RIT course, Written Communication II was with a teacher who really had a bad attitude. I mean that teacher would kind of be degrading or mock out the students and would bring in stories and would tease students maybe about how they were sitting or if they were sitting with their leg placed inappropriately. And at the beginning of the course, the teacher went off about their work experience and how long they worked here and different sorts of experiences that they had. Then one of the students wrote an essay about a personal experience with their family. They asked us to write about our own personal experiences to write an essay about comparing and contrasting something. I think that I told you that I wrote about my sister. Well, this other student, this boy, I think he was a third or fourth year student who had recently found out that he was adopted. His family was an adoptive family, and he had no idea for 20 years that he was adopted. He was 23 years old and just found out. So he wrote this essay, and I thought it would kind of help him to express it and get it down on paper. And the teacher said, would you mind getting up in front of the class and sharing your personal story? And he was just so mortified and deflated. And I think that it really hindered our educational progress. You know, those sorts of personal conflicts, and you know, you could just see the students
disengaging. You could see it on their faces. That is the teacher that I got in this big argument with about getting an “F”.

In this narrative, Sami describes the teacher in negative terms, reflecting the adversarial relationship this teacher apparently had with students. She also portrays the teacher as insensitive, using the example of the teacher asking the classmate to share his private essay about his adoption when apparently he did not want to.

The conflict Sami experienced with this teacher revealed a huge cultural conflict that centered around use of language.

And it is interesting. About two weeks later I got into this confrontation with this teacher over an “F.” Her choice of words on what she wrote on my paper was “too bad that you wouldn’t go for tutoring help.” Well, I read that, and I said you mean too bad that you wouldn’t go for help? You got an “F.” And in ASL, that sign “too bad” means like “too bad for you. You refused to get any help so it is your fault, and you are getting an ‘F,’ and I have no empathy for you.” So I confronted her on it, and I said, “Too bad. That is not a proper way to express that.” And the teacher said, “Oh, no, no, no. I didn’t mean too bad the way that you are explaining it. I mean like oh, shoot, isn’t that a shame.” And so I told her that was like being tricky or devious with English. And the teacher responded in a way that I found very patronizing or demoralizing saying, “oh, you are always misunderstanding.” And I was wondering, did I really misunderstand, or I didn’t understand English? And it was devastating. I had no motivation to stay involved in that course. Things spun out of control, and I ended up failing that last course, that Written Communication II. So, those are four very different experiences with English courses. And, you know, I expected that I
would be able to meet that teacher from Written Communication II and get help on writing projects, but they weren’t receptive. They said you are in an RIT writing course, and you should be able to do the work independently and pass it. So, I went on doing the best that I could, but that comment “too bad,” I mean really had an impact on me.

This miscommunication or cultural conflict that Sami relates took place with a hearing teacher, corroborating her earlier comments about why she prefers deaf teachers. Sami’s narrative describes a discourse conflict (revealed by the different understandings of the phrase “too bad”) that was intensified by the teacher’s comment, “oh, you are always misunderstanding.” In this situation, Sami reveals that she already feels a disconnect with English itself as well as the writing course and instructor, and being confronted with a demoralizing experience like this seems to have intensified that feeling and to have raised further doubts in Sami’s mind about her ability to get through the course and the academic English system.

Sami also perceived her teachers to be impatient with meeting her needs and unwilling to clarify rationales or other implicit expectations.

And I might have a question or I wanted to clarify or I might want to ... and sometimes I figured that I would hold my questions until later and meet them in their office. But they just seemed not receptive to that. They seemed like just get on with the work. It is an RIT course, and you need to meet the challenge. So sometimes the expectations weren’t clear to me, and sometimes in that sense, they didn’t meet my expectations. Sometimes the way they assigned writing essays or sometimes they would give us an assignment where we were supposed to write a
summary, and other times they would give us an assignment and we were supposed
to put down citations for our work. We were supposed to put down citations, but
they didn’t really explain in detail the importance of putting down citations and how
it related to academic writing. I mean, they just gave us a general, superficial
explanation, and sometimes they would tell us oh, you are missing your citations.
But they didn’t give us enough detailed information about the rules of using
citations. So it made it tough. I mean, they didn’t explain things like MLA.

This cultural conflict might be related to communication, but it does highlight the
entirely different world views brought to bear in this situation by the players. Sami the
student expected much more explicit step-by-step explanation of what to do in her English
courses, and her teachers seemed to expect her to figure that out on her own, which she
found challenging since she felt that she did not have all the resources or information
required to succeed, hence why she was asking for help in the first place.

Other types of cultural conflicts take place in these situations, including instances
where my participants felt that teachers were not entirely honest with students or at least
were misleading them, albeit with good intentions. During the focus group, Kofu Brown
remarked:

I have a friend who has been struggling with English a lot, and I do wish that the
teachers or tutors or somebody would be honest with them and say, you know
what? I think that you just need to go and read a lot of books. Maybe that will help
improve your writing. Or give them some kind of resources that may help. But none
of the tutors or teachers do that. They say oh, you will be fine. You will pass. The
important thing is to practice. So they keep hearing that same thing over and over
and over, and that is what they keep trying to do. But then they fail and they fail and they fail.

Kofu reveals his perception that sometimes teachers are not willing to tell students what students may not want to hear, but what may actually help them improve. Moses responded affirmatively:

You are right. Nobody has bothered to say anything. They are just saying oh, you are doing great. Don’t worry about it. You’ll pass. And they are just accepting that.

This comment from Moises could be interpreted as another perception of low expectations on the part of teachers. This could be considered a cultural conflict in that by telling students they are doing well, but not providing constructive criticism, teachers are preventing students from progressing through the academic English system.

EXPECTATIONS FOR TEACHERS

The issue of what my participants expected from their teachers generated a wide variety of responses. Many of them were fairly straightforward, but a few revealed underlying conflicts that have proven difficult to resolve.

CONFLICTING EXPECTATIONS: INDEPENDENCE VS. SUPPORT

A conversation during the focus group between Kaylee Wallin, the mainstreamed student who entered college at the highest levels of the English course sequence, and Sami Bradley, the student who entered at one of the lower level courses, highlighted opposing viewpoints on one aspect of this issue: who is responsible for student motivation and therefore student success? Kaylee, who was a peer tutor at the time of these interviews, said that the students were responsible for their own motivation:
When you come to school, and you are sitting in a classroom and your teacher doesn’t really motivate you, sometimes you think that the teacher has got to do this and help me. But you have to do it on your own. In college you have to have your own internal motivation. That is something that you need. I mean like Kofu said, the teacher will say, hey good job! You did your stuff, and you did your work. And give him his tests. Give him his things. Some teachers don’t care. The important thing is that you follow the rules, and you do whatever you can to do well. But you have got to have that internal motivation. You can’t rely on external motivations or external things to motivate you. I don’t believe that you can come into college and expect all kinds of people saying, hey good job and patting you on the back and way to go! So, if a student says, hey I need a little bit of help, I’ll help them. But if they don’t have the motivation, it is hard [to tutor them]. But, if they come in with a motivation to succeed and to do well, well, then I feel like I really can help them, and they will do well. They are not just going to ignore everything that I say. I don’t think that there is only one single strategy. I don’t want to be the cheerleader for all the students. They should be their own cheerleaders.

Sami responded by saying that she felt teachers had some responsibility for student success:

I have a different perspective. I am not saying that the teachers should just be there praising them all the time. I am saying give motivation. So, for example, I am an NTID tutor, and the student might come in with their work and say well, this is good enough, and then the tutor might say well, that’s all right. And then you go to the RIT tutor, and the RIT tutor will have a discussion with you as to why you chose your
words or picked the structure or did whatever. So, it is not going to RIT and being spoon-fed and being treated like a lap dog. It is being given the appropriate information to give you motivation. That is what I was talking about.

Kofu intervened at this point and attempted to bring the two together by acknowledging agreement with both points and reinterpreting Sami’s point so that it resided closer to Kaylee’s point about internal locus of control as a source of motivation.

It was something that you said, Kaylee. Maybe it’s a little bit off the point, but I am going to add something there. But, also I wanted to say something about what Sami said.... I think that it is true. I think that it is more of an idea of a comfort zone. Like at CSUN, it is a whole different situation than here at RIT and NTID. At CSUN, deaf students take the courses mainstreamed whereas here at NTID, it is more like a deaf school, where you have deaf teachers, and everybody in the class is deaf. And so for example, if I want to sit down and talk with my teacher, I can do that. And they are going hey, I have been waiting for you! Come on! You were supposed to have been here at such and such a time. Whatever. And we will sit down and figure things out. I’ll write stuff and then give it to them and the teacher will be like oh! That’s exactly what I am looking for! And that would give me more motivation. And that would give me motivation to figure things out on my own. And that really has helped me because I built that relationship with the teachers that has really, really helped.

When you have a relationship with a teacher, then it is going to encourage you to feel more motivated because that teacher believes in you.

Kofu’s point is that teachers and students occupy the same sphere and really cannot be as separate as Sami interpreted Kaylee to be saying. Kaylee never explicitly disregarded
the role of teachers in students’ success; her comment emphasized her point that students can control only themselves in their life situations, and they should focus on doing whatever they need to do in order to succeed. Sami wanted Kaylee to acknowledge that teachers play an important role in this process, and Kofu validated that point of view with his remarks.

**Know your students**

A point raised by two participants focused on teachers understanding who their students were and the needs of those students in specific classes. Sami, who felt uncomfortable with English, hoped that her teachers would be able to tailor their instruction to her needs:

I expected teachers to understand my strengths and weaknesses and to have some patience with me and to help me improve my writing and my English. I expected that I would be able to go in and see them, and they would help me improve my writing plus how to use the structure of English and also the vocabulary that we were going to use. And also something about syntax and word order.

Because Sami perceived teachers as having significant power or control over her fate in the academic English system, she expected them to also share strategies and rules that would help her succeed in this system. She expected them to participate in her success by working with her to help her develop the skills she needed to progress. Kaylee responded to this issue a little differently than Sami:

I wish the expectations were higher. I wish they would [unclear] their knowledge that not every deaf person is the same in terms of intelligence. I wish they would expect a lot, want a lot, demand a lot or fail the students because that would make
the students work harder. That’s my belief, is that the more you expect, the harder
the students will work. Some of my toughest classes I loved. The teacher would
give out all this work, oh fine, keep up with the writing, good, then fine.

Whereas Sami sought what she considered a helping hand in order to succeed,
Kaylee felt that challenges and new goals were the way to inspire students to succeed.
These two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they do reflect differing
points of view on essentially the same situation.

**Provide Help, Be Available**

Some participants wanted their teachers to be more accessible and available for
students who needed help. Moises offered a basic list of expectations along with a couple
of suggestions for teachers, primarily asking that they respond to student requests in a
timely manner:

- Of course, providing resources for helping with homework and teaching and
tutoring to make sure that the students fully understand what they are teaching in
class. And what they are trying to get us to learn. And their availability for office
hours so that students can go to get help. To be there for us and to regularly check
their e-mail accounts to see if students contacted them or not. Most of the time we
never get that. I wish teachers would improve their e-mail checking so that they
don’t just tell us that it is our fault when we get overwhelmed, you know?

Zara Vitch also talked about various ways that teachers could improve the
classroom experiences of their deaf students.

And also classes should have group discussions because I have noticed that oral
presentations and sign language and writing are very different. We should try to
merge those together somehow. I think that the English professors should provide oral presentation and writing at the same time so that you could compare and contrast those.

And one-to-one tutoring weekly. Not making the students responsible to come see me. Have a weekly meeting set up with the students to help the students, so that they feel that it is okay to go ahead and meet the professor one-on-one for tutoring. Because at the NLC, not many students go for tutoring because they feel embarrassed to meet there, especially for English. It is embarrassing, and people tend to look down them. I think so. I think that if you had regular, established weekly meetings with the teachers, students would be much more comfortable, plus they would develop a rapport with the teachers, and you would have teachers interacting with students, and they wouldn't have that experience of being patronized.

In her suggestion that teachers set aside blocks of one-on-one time with each student each week rather than let students decide independently whether to make appointments with the teachers or go on their own to the tutoring center, Zara seems to be putting the onus on the teachers for students’ sense of comfort and success. Furthermore, she is repeating a perception among some, not all, students that going to the tutoring center is a shameful thing, reinforcing that internal conflict between actively seeking out help and protecting one’s image.
COMMUNICATION

Participants mentioned their expectations related to communication with their teachers, many of them centered around the use of sign language. Sami tied sign language skills with teaching skills:

For example, before I took a course, what I envisioned was the teachers would sign really well, write examples in English, then explain them clearly in ASL, knowing that deaf students mostly are second language users and have weaknesses. So, they would support them with sign language and use that to explain things in-depth.

Well, I came into class, and as I was sitting there in the first class, I found that it was exactly the opposite. I remember my first year experience in an NTID course, the teacher would kind of read from a book and just vocalize and not sign. And then they would address the vocabulary, and they would write some of the vocabulary on the blackboard, and then they would use an overhead, and they projected an overhead and just point at what they had written. It was like follow the finger as they pointed at the overhead. And I would try and read that and take some notes and follow along, and I would end up asking one of my fellow students, boy what is this about? What is the homework, and what do we have to do? And they became almost like my teaching assistant, if you will. But I went ahead and wrote what I was expected to write and got through that course and oh, what a relief when I finally finished that course!

Sami’s narrative reveals that she assumed her teachers would be communicatively accessible, but her experience was the opposite when she had a course with a teacher who used traditional teaching methods commonly used with hearing students, which she found
unhelpful. Her focus in this course was merely to pass it and not to improve her skills since she did not find the class to be conducive to her learning needs. She continued her story:

Then I was ready to register for another course, saw there was a deaf teacher, so I registered for a section with the deaf teacher, and they had a very different way of teaching. The deaf teacher would assign us to do some readings, and then with the vocabulary words that were in the reading, they would write those down, and we would discuss how the different words were used and have open discussion. For all of the homework that we had to do, we would talk about the vocabulary.

Then in another RIT course, Written Communication I, I took that with a teacher who was a really good signer. He was hearing, but that was fine. I went into class and felt like I could rise to the occasion, but sometimes he would have to modify his communication for other students in the class, and then it wasn’t as accessible to me. But he explained things really well. And that is when I realized that I had those expectations related to communication.

Sami’s expectation was to understand the teacher and correspondingly understand the material, and any time the teacher adjusted classroom communication to accommodate students who relied less on ASL than Sami did, she felt that she missed some of the information. The bottom line for Sami and her success in her English classes was her reliance on accessible sign communication in the classroom: when she had it, she felt empowered.

Roxanne also wanted her teachers to sign clearly, expecting them to possess this skill in this particular college with this program designed specifically for teaching deaf
students, as she explained earlier in this chapter, concluding, “I really expect motivation, good attitude, and good sign language so we all could learn well from the teacher.”

Zara wanted to go one step further, demanding that not only her teachers, but all teachers at RIT learn American Sign Language:

RIT professors should learn ASL. Basic ASL, enough to communicate with students because without American Sign Language, there is going to be miscommunication, impatience, and frustration, and the students are not going to remain motivated. They won’t stay motivated.

According to Zara, communication is an essential aspect of student engagement and motivation, and she seems to feel that teachers play a large role in this and should take more responsibility for communicating effectively.

CHALLENGE STUDENTS

Several participants mentioned that they wanted to feel challenged by their English teachers and their English courses. They wanted to learn, and to learn, they felt they needed to be challenged more than they were. Kaylee was highly motivated to learn and be challenged:

I expected a big challenge from them. I expected, like, I wanted to be overwhelmed. Not OVERwhelmed, just overwhelmed. Some of the things were interesting, some were really boring. They taught fine. There was not a problem, they could have been more interesting, but a lot of professors are not. I don’t think I expected anything, just came in expecting anything. I prepared myself for anything. Not, this is what I want, a professor who is inspired by her work, a professor who loves to do what she does. Some don’t, you know, so I just got through class.
Kofu felt that his teachers didn’t challenge him, but they did challenge his classmates:

I expected that my teachers would challenge me with the coursework. But, what happened of course, that wasn’t true. The challenge that they had, I had already faced those challenges in high school and they are giving me the same thing again, so I kind of had to wait until the next challenge would arrive. I would ask my teacher, could you find something to challenge me or is more demanding of me? But they said no, they couldn’t do that because it wouldn’t be fair to the other classmates, the folks in the classroom. So I kind of had to tolerate that and put up with what was going on. So I asked for them to propose something that would get to the next level, and they would say no because they really had to follow the policy or the curriculum or that. So, again, I was put in a position to having to tolerate what was going on. I just don’t think that it happened in the classroom. It wasn’t appropriate for me because my motivation really went down.

My classmates, I think that they were motivated, and they were really challenged with things. They were learning something that would benefit them, but I didn’t see any benefit out of there for me. Some of them, they were like oh man, this is too hard or I quit. I thought that they would rise to the challenge. But, for example, the second or third day of the class, there was one boy in the class who felt overwhelmed, and it was too challenging so he just left. And I was like ooooh, I didn’t find that a struggle. I thought that struggling a little bit would benefit them. So I had difficulty. If they find a challenge, they should persevere, and I kind of didn’t understand why they were so willing to give up. I was hoping that they would learn
something, but I didn’t see that happening. So I didn’t really expect anything from them anymore. My expectations always came out the opposite. It was always the opposite of what I expected to see is what happened in the class.

Kofu is describing a situation where he felt that he was better prepared and more literate than his classmates, which meant that the course was not challenging for him at the same time it was challenging for his classmates. He criticized the ones who didn’t try and who gave up when they felt overwhelmed because he felt that the only way to get ahead was to pass the course and prepare for the next level of the English course sequence.

PERCEIVED TEACHER EXPECTATIONS

My participants discussed not only what they expected from their teachers, they also raised their perceptions of what their teachers expected from them. This theme emerged as part of the thinking and analytical process my participants seemed to go through as they sorted out their experiences and perceptions. Most of the participants seemed to perceive that their teachers expected them to work hard and do well, but a few remarked that they felt the teachers were not optimistic about student success.

WORK HARD AND IMPROVE

Sami Bradley seemed to distinguish between the expectations of NTID teachers versus RIT teachers:

I think that they expected me to write and to improve my writing so when they would read my writing, they would understand what I was saying. And I believe that they expected me to improve and to become a good writer. During the NTID courses in English, I felt that the teachers recognized my strengths and weaknesses and
helped work with me to improve those. At RIT, I think the teachers had high expectations and high demands for any essays or required writing, and so I felt more challenged in the RIT courses, more challenged in writing English.

Sami explains that she felt more of a partnership with the teachers in the NTID courses, whereas with the teachers in the RIT courses, she felt that she was expected to work independently and succeed on her own.

Mark Smith, who took only NTID courses, seemed to think that his teachers expected him to improve his English to the point that he could take on new challenges or promotions at work:

Teachers encourage students to improve English. If your major requires you to take the upper level English courses, they encourage you to pass your courses. They encourage you to improve your English because your career requires a lot of writing to make hearing people understand. The teachers know me, I work on machines, but they encouraged me to improve because maybe I’ll be promoted from machines to management, and you need to write a lot. True, but... it depends on the career and what people are interested in. Some people aren’t interested in management. I’m not interested in management, I don’t like to stand and talk in front of groups of people. Stage fright!

For Mark, improving his English was merely a means of passing his courses to get his degree; he was not inspired or motivated to improve his English for promotion into a managerial position.
Zara Vitch seemed to feel that teachers expected deaf students to achieve college writing skills independently, regardless of their prior educational background and achievement:

It is frustrating because each student has their own individual weaknesses. And I do wish that the teachers could focus on students individually. But they do have standards that they expect from everyone to meet the college level at RIT, and they feel that it is the students’ responsibility. I think that they should change that so that they could set up like weekly one-to-one meetings or individual appointments with students. I think that they would see great improvement. I mean I was really eager to meet with my professors, and that helped me a lot rather than just doing it my own way and not getting input.

Unlike Sami, Zara acknowledges that instructors expect students to work independently, but like Sami, she still would like to see them more involved on a one-on-one basis with students who struggle.

**EXPECTATIONS TOO HIGH**

A number of participants felt that teachers expected deaf students to attain English skills similar to those of hearing students, but were not accepting of deaf students’ particular challenges and abilities. Zara explained her perception:

Because my experience of their expectations was different from my expectations. When I made improvements, it seemed like it was never good enough, never satisfactory because my English wasn’t as strong as the English skills of hearing students at RIT. That is why they have to remember that deaf and hearing people are equal as human beings.
She explained in more detail her perception that teachers demanded improvement at the same time they would not accept as adequate the skills their deaf students did have. She seemed to expect some kind of finite end point in the English learning process, using math as an analogy, and she expressed frustration at the recursive nature of language learning.

They expected that every class they would come in and lecture and that we would understand what they were trying to teach us; the English that they were trying to teach us. But it was not like in math, you can find one correct solution. You work out the problem, there is a right or wrong answer when you are done. With the teachers in English class, they wanted us to improve our English, but for them it was never sufficient. I mean, all of the students had their individual differences and our own vocabulary, and we were still confused about nouns and verbs and adjectives and grammatical structure. It was just all messed up, and the teachers expected us to know how to take advantage and to progress. But in some ways it was like too late. Roxanne agreed that teachers expected a great deal from students, but she didn't seem to feel these expectations were unrealistic:

They have high expectations of me. They expect me to do well on papers, such as grammar and structure of essay. I have no problem with structure, but I do notice that teacher remind me constantly about grammars. They just make me feel down because I am trying so hard to remember every rule, but seems like I am not doing them right at all. But of course, I noticed myself improved with grammars. But teacher always have high expectations for us.
Roxanne's viewpoint seems to be that as students try and improve, they become empowered to move on, always meeting new challenges and overcoming them in a continuous process of continual improvement and growth. Sami Bradley, the student who experienced serious communication problems with some of her teachers, was particularly careful to address her own role in understanding teacher expectations:

I solve that by asking the teacher what is the purpose of the assignment? And asking them to explain the assignment in a little more depth, the homework assignments or whatever. And I make sure that I ask the teacher directly. One time I tried that in Written Communication II, the last English course that I took here. So I asked the teacher and they said, you read and write English. Read the syllabus. What does the syllabus say? Read it! And I said, I don't understand what that means. She said, well, you got to learn to read and write English and understand it. I felt like the teacher was playing games with me, and that she was just looking down at deaf students. And I guess that it is okay to have high expectations when a student enters a class, but you know, it is like they want to challenge me, and that is okay. It was like they were playing games with me, though. I mean maybe I just chose the wrong teacher for that course. I guess that is my perspective.

In this situation, Sami narrates her active role in seeking information she felt she needed to succeed in the course and her reaction to being told to figure out some of it herself from material (the syllabus) provided by the teacher. According to Sami, the teacher expected her to learn independently, but this caused Sami to experience confusion and some resentment, especially after she made a special effort to clarify the expectations with the teacher.
EXPECTATIONS TOO LOW

Some participants felt that teachers did not expect deaf students to achieve a great deal in their English courses. Kaylee Wallin perceived that teachers demanded a great deal, but were not optimistic:

I think that teachers who teach English don’t have high expectations of students. They want a lot from students, yes, as much as they can get, but they don’t have high hopes.

Moises Jones made the distinction between RIT and the working world when he described his perceptions of hearing people’s expectations of deaf people:

Out in the world at large and the world of work, people expect deaf people and hearing people to have the same skill level. But in academics, in academia it is a different story.

With this comment, Moises implies that teachers at RIT did not necessarily share the same expectations of deaf students as hearing people elsewhere, who might be less familiar with deaf people and their challenges and experiences. He seems to think that hearing people who are not familiar with deaf people assume that they can achieve the same as hearing people, unlike instructors at RIT, who are more familiar with the challenges and the abilities of deaf students.

Kofu Brown perceived that his teachers did not share the same assessment of his abilities as he did and that they assumed he was not as capable as he felt he was:

I thought that teachers would find something that would challenge me in those courses, but they really didn’t do that in actuality. I wanted to learn. I was really motivated to learn, but they expected that I would have a lot of struggles, and I
wouldn’t be able to learn some of the grammar and all of that. But it really wasn’t true. But that is how I felt that they looked at me. I felt that teachers don’t really see our potential. And I felt that specifically they didn’t see my potential at all. Maybe they thought that I would be successful in English. Maybe their experiences with other students were that they tended to struggle a lot of times so that they kind of perseverated on that. They generalized things. But deaf people like myself, I have a potential to write and read English. And I would hope that the instructors would see that also.

In this comment, Kofu explains that he thinks that instructors assume that deaf students in general will not do well and that they assume he will be like all the other deaf students, which he feels is unfair and limiting. Zara narrated experiences with teachers giving assignments she felt were too basic and not challenging enough to prepare her for upper level college work, which she inferred to mean that teachers did not expect students to be able to do more challenging work:

Some of the homework they gave us just made me laugh. They would have like hang-man. And writing essays. They would assign an essay like, “How to teach your cousin to ride a bicycle.” I don’t think that is equivalent to what they expect at RIT. I don’t think that they have those sort of essay questions, and it felt like they were really keeping it overly basic, looking down on us. And I think that the students weren’t too happy about that because the professors here had such low expectations that when [the students] arrived at RIT, they were really taken aback and shocked at the level of work expected. I really jumped ahead.
In this observation, Zara is saying that students who come through the remedial courses are not prepared enough for the challenges found at the baccalaureate level courses, which results in their feeling overwhelmed and misled. As an older student, Zara may be speaking on the basis of more life experience than some of the other participants, but she also disregards the essential point that students begin from individual starting places and that the process of learning English or any other language is naturally recursive, something that she had expressed frustration with.
CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

According to Sokolowski, phenomenology enables us to “deal with the problem of the difference between the objective, scientific world and the subjective, lived world (2000, p. 147).” This study has presented the lived world of 11 participants, whose subjective experiences are not found in the objective scientific world of generally negative assessments of their abilities and potential in academic English literacy. The use of the phenomenological research approach in this study has allowed us to listen to their stories and “look at and describe, analytically, all the particular intentionalities and their correlates, and world belief as well, with the world as its correlative (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 47).”

As my participants have told us, their experiences in the process of working to achieve academic English literacy in college have been challenging on a number of levels, some of them within their control, others not. In nearly all cases, my participants have felt disadvantaged. Even so, they continued to negotiate academic literacy in college.

One of the earliest advocates for disadvantaged college writers was Mina Shaughnessy, director of the Instructional Resource Center of The City University of New York (CUNY) until her death in 1978. Shaughnessy oversaw the integration of college students during the radical and experimental implementation of CUNY’s open admission policy that began in 1970. Of that undertaking, she wrote, “Seldom had an educational venture begun so inauspiciously, the teachers unready in mind and heart to face their students, the students weighted by the disadvantages of poor training yet expected to
‘catch up’ with the front-runners in a semester or two of low-intensity instruction (1977, p. 3).”

This description fits, to some degree, the situation that my participants perceive themselves to be in, of being disadvantaged and still faced with very challenging expectations. Furthermore, Shaughnessy’s description of the most disadvantaged students in her program also matches my participants, to some degree, “… graduates of the same public school system as the other students, they were nonetheless strangers in academia, unacquainted with the rules and rituals of college life, unprepared for the sorts of tasks their teachers were about to assign them (1977, pp. 2-3).”

Success in college depends on language proficiency, especially written English and academic discourse, for two reasons: language proficiency is traditionally expected in college, and no other proficiency will be accepted for certification. In other words, academic literacy is conferred only upon proof of written English competence. Even Shaughnessy ratifies this concept in her classic work, but at least she is sympathetic, supportive, and pragmatic, unlike some of the teachers described by my participants.

**EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENTS**

As Chapter 1 explained, deaf students enter the educational system with particular attributes that present challenges for acquiring academic English literacy, especially in college. They frequently matriculate in college with 7th and 8th grade reading levels, sometimes lower (Aldersley, 2008), which means they naturally will need significant extra time to complete their course requirements, something they overlook or are unaware of, but teachers recognize. However, the attitude of the teachers toward this condition does
influence students’ perceptions of their own potential, frequently negatively, which I will
discuss later in this chapter.

According to my informants, many of the teachers they work with continue to hold a
hegemonic position with regard to the students and their potential. Participants reported
that their teachers expect them to achieve in similar ways as their hearing peers simply
because the students have been admitted to college. Participants believe the teachers, who
typically are hearing, naturally view their students from the lens of being hearing, which is
to be expected. Participants also reported that intellectually, teachers may understand that
students are deaf and have not experienced the language development or concept and
information intake that their hearing peers have, but they still express frustration with the
output that deaf students produce in their college English courses.

The hegemonic position/attitude demonstrated by some teachers in this study
continues to be reflected in current research literature on best practices for remediating
deaf children’s language acquisition challenges. Much of this literature is influenced by the
perceived potential of cochlear implants to transform the learning experiences of this
population of students. As discussed in Chapter 2, the optimal period for language learning
is considered to be before the age of 3. Research studies have indicated that the earlier
deaf children are exposed to sound and provided auditory training, the greater the
likelihood that their reading skills will be commensurate with those of their hearing peers
(Martindale, 2007). The increased interest in and application of cochlear implants in
children, particularly before the age of 3 for the purpose of early intervention, has
reinforced this age-old expectation that deaf children be like hearing children. An example
of this expectation appears in a journal article published at the end of 2007, “With access to
and use of speech sounds, children who are deaf can benefit from all of the building blocks of reading *in a manner similar to that of their hearing peers* (italics mine) (Martindale, 2007, p. 74).”

My argument is not that advances in technology or therapeutic intervention should be avoided in working with deaf people. Rather, it is that all too often, hearing people working with deaf children and adults forget that the life experience of deaf people is qualitatively and profoundly different than that of hearing people. Even when a deaf child gets a cochlear implant early in life, that child is still deaf and has not become “hearing” simply because of the technology. After all, once the implant processor is turned off at night or during showers or while swimming, the child cannot hear. People seem to forget this fundamental fact and continue to expect deaf children to perform similarly to hearing children, especially when they possess bionic technology like cochlear implants.

This kind of inappropriate assessment has been imposed on bilingual learners as well, reflecting the hegemonic position that I have defined as expecting members of minority groups to achieve similarly as members of the majority group despite their particular challenges. According to Cummins, innumerable bilingual learners have been misdiagnosed as unsuccessful learners based on their poor standardized test scores because their conversational fluency in English (their second language) is not adequate for mastering decontextualized, discrete academic tasks. “In other words, the failure of school personnel to distinguish between the development of conversational or surface fluency in English and cognitive/academic aspects of English proficiency can result in low academic performance being attributed to deficient cognitive or personality traits within minority
language students (Cummins, 1984, p. 136).” Deaf students have been assessed in similarly negative terms in school, reflecting a disregard of their particular circumstances.

By the time deaf students like my informants arrive in college, they feel intense pressure on a number of levels. First of all, when they begin their college English courses, even though many of these courses may be remedial, they often feel underprepared for these courses, as my informants Mike Massa and Sami Bradley indicated. Secondly, students like these tend to receive financial support from their state vocational rehabilitation agencies, which now are imposing time limits to degree completion, increasing the pressure that these students feel to progress through the curriculum and graduate with a degree (particularly a bachelor's degree). The combination of underpreparation with pressure to complete degree requirements is not conducive to academic English literacy acquisition in light of this population's need for additional time to catch up with the language itself and of the fact that RIT is on a 10-week quarter system, another time restriction.

Furthermore, at a college like RIT that offers special programs and courses designed to meet the needs of deaf students, students like my informants naturally expect that the sign communication abilities of the instructors in their classrooms will be at least adequate for the task before them, that of teaching their students academic English. As my informants tell us, this is often not the case, which then creates a troubling new situation, that of frustration and a sense of betrayal on the part of students as they interact with the faculty who are not fully engaged in their students’ learning experiences. These faculty may have the best of intentions in trying to communicate to these students the expectations of the hearing world, but if they cannot communicate effectively in the
manner that my students feel is most effective or if they take a position that effectively marginalizes these students, success is a dim hope.

I have already explained the parameters and challenges faced by my participants in their acquisition of academic English. Now I will place this in the illustrative, interpretive context of research done on hearing English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) students acquiring academic English, who also have been shown to need a great deal more time than their hearing first-language counterparts to complete course requirements. What holds true for this ESL population seems to hold true for deaf students (Bowers, 2007).

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Generally, deaf students are proficient communicators on an interpersonal level, showing competence in what Cummins terms basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS). Cummins defines the BICS as “the manifestation of language proficiency in everyday communicative contexts (1984, p. 137).”

Deaf students use many of the same principles of communicative organization as their hearing counterparts. For example, they know that conversations follow structures and involve turn taking (Kasper, 1997, p. 2) and that this turn-taking varies according to the social setting (Valli, Lucas, & Mulrooney, 2005). They also understand the concept of register variation in discourse settings (Valli et al., 2005).

Furthermore, deaf students understand how information is organized for purposes of communication. For instance, they know—and use—the rhetorical organizational mode known as given/new, where given information is managed before new information is introduced. A study by Albertini (1990) showed that in natural writing situations (daily journals), deaf college students employed the given/new organizational mode. Like their
hearing counterparts, deaf students demonstrate pragmatic competence and knowledge of conversational organization.

All of this communicative competence has not helped deaf students achieve academic literacy, however, as has also been shown to be true of many hearing ESL learners (Cummins, 1984). In their discussion of a process writing instruction approach they used with deaf high school learners of English, Keenan and Bowers elaborate on how Cummins explains the expression of language proficiency in the classroom.

Context-embedded situations... are everyday communicative happenings in which many clues to meaning are available, and the participants can negotiate for meaning and receive feedback. Context-reduced situations... include those found within the classroom setting where meaning relies largely on knowledge of the language itself.

(Keenan & Bowers, 1988, p. 7)

Essentially, in face-to-face situations, students can gather information from a variety of sources in different ways, enabling them to make meaning within context and then complete school tasks successfully. However, with typical classroom assignments, particularly in English classes, students are limited to the texts at hand for sources of information, and this may be inadequate if they cannot read well or are unfamiliar with the discourse of the classroom.

ACADEMIC LITERACY

What does it mean to be academically literate? According to Cummins, it requires Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), which is “competence in the academic aspects of English, the formal language of reports, essays, standardized tests, and other works used to assess students’ knowledge (Cruz, 2004, p. 15).” Cruz explains, “Ironically,
students may have the knowledge, but if they do not possess the linguistic labels that correspond to that awareness, they do not achieve academic success. CALP is acquired by deciphering text and discourse; it is not rich with visual, gestures, intonation, or other graphic representation, as is everyday speech.... Abstract and complex, it develops slowly (Cruz, 2004, p. 15).”

Not only does CALP develop slowly for hearing students, it develops even more slowly for deaf students, who experience language and cognitive delays as a result of being unable to access English, an auditory language, according to Bowers, a teacher of the deaf since 1973. Bowers explained in a presentation to the NTID Department of Liberal Studies, “It generally takes a hearing second-language learner about two years to develop what Cummins calls ‘basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS).’ [The same] second-language learner takes at least 5-7 years to obtain what Cummins calls [CALP] (language required for academic work and success). I have noted that deaf students appear to require maybe twice this amount of time to achieve CALP (Bowers, 2007).” The point here is that deaf students, who should not be considered deficient learners, can attain CALP if given the time they need to catch up with their hearing peers.

So, in light of this reality, consider the circumstances faced by my deaf participants and other deaf students like them: typically being born to hearing parents, unable to access English early in life, experiencing delays in language and cognitive development, enduring communicative challenges, frequently failing to achieve grade-level proficiency in English based on standardized testing, and being denied literate citizenship as a result. In this study, my participants painted a portrait of frustration with attaining this kind of proficiency in college English classes.
PARTICIPANT SUMMARIES

Each participant’s life and experiences were individual and unique, but as this study has shown, certain themes and realities emerged throughout, particularly in their college English experiences. The participants are presented in the order in which they were initially interviewed.

Jackie Frieda, a transfer student in her 30s, was pragmatic about her English learning experiences. As someone who both speaks and uses sign language, she described how she felt educated and liberated once she arrived at RIT and began to catch up with what she said was missing in her English education. She appreciated the fact that her teachers signed with her because she felt that this improved communication and ensured her success in learning. She balanced her annoyance with her peers (she felt they were wasting her time when they didn't focus during class) with her commitment to completing her English course requirements, including writing multiple drafts, which she disliked doing, but perceived as being beneficial to her English language proficiency over time. She also liked going to peer tutors, considering them another resource for better understanding how effective her writing was.

Sami Bradley, who had deaf parents and a deaf sister, expressed great frustration with academic English in college. She felt disconnected from the language itself because it seemed inaccessible to her as an ASL user who did not speak. She arrived at RIT expecting individualized instruction tailored to her particular needs and areas of improvement, but felt disappointed instead by what she perceived to be simplistic, traditional instruction in reading and writing. She was most motivated in literature courses where she could use her ASL and work in groups, where she felt she learned and retained more information. Sami
preferred group discussions because then she could use ASL, her native language, and participate actively in her own learning. She admitted that her world knowledge and background information was inadequate for the nonfiction reading assignments and essay expectations of RIT English courses, and she described reading as being difficult because it was not a visual exercise for her. She perceived several of her hearing teachers as being unwilling to provide what she considered meaningful feedback and as prone to cultural conflicts. Of all the participants, Sami described the most experience with severe cultural conflicts and communication problems with her hearing teachers.

Like Sami, Joseph Goino, the student who experienced both a school for the deaf and a mainstream high school, also felt frustrated with academic English in college. Joseph described how he was not challenged in his deaf school, and when he transferred to the mainstream school, he felt very challenged, but also supported by his classroom interpreter and his teacher, who apparently helped him a great deal with his coursework. He arrived at RIT and felt stymied in his English courses by the expectation that he would work successfully independently. He disliked writing essays, preferring to use ASL, but he did enjoy learning Latin roots for vocabulary development, perceiving that to be a worthwhile and useful activity. In college, he tended to read merely to find the answers rather than to improve his skills or obtain knowledge. He lacked confidence in his ability to succeed in his college English courses, but in the course of the focus group, seemed to find a sense of faith in his own potential. He spoke often of his desire to earn a bachelor’s degree, his underlying motivation for continuing to work on passing his English courses.

Mark Smith, the returning student who had been laid off from the job he held for 10 years, viewed college English as a means to an end, not as a true tool for his own success.
He found no intrinsic value to English in his personal life, but he understood that the world around him expected some level of competency in English. He strongly disliked writing and reading because reading for him was difficult and not visual. For Mark, group discussions were invaluable for helping him understand the course material. His mother played a large role in his ability to survive school, and he appreciated her support and help. He explained that his goal was to pass his English courses in order to earn his degree and that at the workplace, his spoken and written English skills were not good enough for communicative purposes, limiting his interactions with hearing people who did not use sign language.

Kaylee Wallin, the participant with the highest academic achievement, felt perfectly capable of handling college English and found frustration in situations where she felt held back by virtue of being associated with less-skilled deaf students. She described how her mother had sought out advice from various people, including deaf adults, when Kaylee was young and ended up placing her in a school for the deaf so she would have deaf peers even at the same time she made sure that Kaylee read independently. Kaylee’s early reading experiences infused her with positive associations with school English and contributed to her later success at college. She was a high achiever in her college English courses and served as a peer tutor, where she played the role of advocating for her peers in cases where she perceived that their teachers were unreasonable in their expectations. However, she also demanded of her peers that they take ownership of their college learning and find personal motivation within themselves to succeed in their college English courses, as she had.
Zara Vitch, the participant whose pre-college educational experience included attending a variety of mainstream public schools and schools for the deaf, totaling about 15, spoke the most negatively about feeling forced to endure college English classes. She described feeling disconnected from her mother early in life and explained that moving to all these different schools did not help root her in positive learning experiences, handicapping her later in college. Because she had not mastered English by the time she arrived in college, she felt particularly resentful when her efforts to meet English course requirements were given poor grades or lots of red feedback marks. She felt that the expectation to achieve the same level of English skill as hearing students was patently unfair to deaf students, given their language and cognitive development backgrounds. She also complained about the poor sign communication abilities of the teachers she encountered, feeling that they had failed to meet their basic obligation to effectively communicate with their deaf students. One aspect of college English that Zara enjoyed were the group discussions in her literature courses; she felt that these enabled her to understand the material and learn effectively. Despite her frustrations, she did accept the notion that passing English was a requirement for obtaining a college degree.

John Doe, another participant with high English achievement, described a similar early life experience as Kaylee, with a mother who worked with him and brought in a teacher who taught him how to sign. John’s view of English was that even though he was not personally fascinated by it, it was necessary for completing college, and it also served to facilitate access to the hearing world and associated success. He enjoyed developing his vocabulary, feeling that it helped strengthen his position in the hearing world. He was
annoyed at his teachers’ obsession with perfect grammar and recognized the struggles many of his peers experienced in their college English courses.

Mike Massa, the participant who began his college career at the lowest level of all the participants, was the most motivated and committed student of academic English in the study group. He said that his pre-college preparation was woefully inadequate for college English, and he described all the hard work and effort he put into catching up with English and passing his courses. For Mike, English was essential to succeeding in college and life. He explained that he enjoyed writing from personal experience, but found other assignments, particularly in-class writing assignments, to be especially challenging. He enjoyed taking courses with different teachers, feeling that he could learn from each one, and he appreciated that they could use sign language with him. He also spoke often of his desire to help inspire his peers to work as hard as he had and achieve similar success.

Moises Jones, who was raised by parents who used signed English with him, had accepted the notion that English was superior to ASL for success in college. When he began college, his motivation was low because of his placement in what he considered to be a sub-par course. His motivation to work hard dramatically improved once he moved through the curriculum into the pre-baccalaureate writing courses, and he began to feel that his work was worthwhile. He felt that the academic English course system took too much time for students to complete, and he complained about what he perceived as “silly rules,” unnecessary obstacles to student success, such as the pink form for tutoring and excessively rigid classroom rules. He raised a recurring dichotomy, where students who work hard to navigate the college English system should be granted success based on their effort, and yet some students try and try to pass, but their work is of insufficient quality.
Roxanne Flores, who also had deaf parents and a deaf sister, was motivated and pragmatic about college English. She kept her eye on the prize of a college degree as she worked hard in her English classes and explained to her sister that English has a purpose in life, but did not have to displace ASL. Like Moises, she felt that students had to take too many courses to complete their English requirements, especially if they began at the lower-level courses, and she particularly hated the pink tutoring form. She raised the problem of poor sign communication skills on the part of instructors as a learning barrier for her. She liked having deaf peers to work with, but also valued her independence and autonomy in her learning experiences.

Kofu Brown, the male transfer student who spoke appreciatively of his mother’s role in his early literacy, felt that the academic English system was set against deaf students. He was highly motivated and passionate about his progress through the curriculum, but he also felt discouraged at times. He felt that he was not being respected by his teachers, that they did not believe in his potential, and that they were not willing to communicate with him. He disliked being assigned writing topics by teachers, feeling unsure of what they expected and much preferring to write from personal experience. Like Kaylee, Kofu believed that students should be the primary actors in their own success in school, but he also believed that teachers should have faith and confidence in their students and establish realistic expectations.

OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS

Several dichotomies were revealed in this study, presenting what could be considered two sides to a single coin in several instances. These dichotomies arose in the
discussion of certain themes, and they included a variety of tensions reflected in the desire for literate citizenship while recognizing barriers to progress.

**Challenge vs. Assistance**

Learners faced with the challenge of learning something new frequently, if not always, require some kind of assistance in this process (Bodrova & Leong, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). In the case of my informants and their peers, the balance between getting enough assistance to understand what they needed to do in their English courses and then do it independently and getting so much assistance that the process becomes a joint venture between the learner and the assistant is very difficult to find. Joseph encountered this in two situations, first when he moved from the deaf school to the mainstream school and felt challenged, but had assistance with his learning, and second when he arrived in college and found the challenge to be beyond his capabilities once that degree of assistance was not available. Unlike Joseph, who sought extensive assistance, Kofu argued for more challenge and more independence, citing his experience in mainstream classes, where he felt he learned more than in his classes at RIT, where he felt held back by too much assistance.

Most of the informants in this study went to tutoring of some kind while they were in their college English courses. One issue that arose for several students was how to be sure that the assistance they received was in fact the “right” kind of assistance, the kind of help that would improve their work and garner a better grade. The dichotomy in this case is that the informants went for help, but doubted the veracity or effectiveness of the help they received, which seems to tie in to the notion of independence versus remediation. The informants struggled to feel confident and competent at doing their work independently, so they went to tutoring for assistance, which then apparently did not infuse them with the
self-assurance that their work met the requirements of the assignment. Rather than viewing the tutoring as assistance, they seemed to view the tutoring as authorization or ratification of their work.

This perception seems to have been formed as a result of typical tutoring interaction, in which tutors frequently hone in on surface errors rather than substantive issues in student assignments for several reasons. One reason is that they do not know the assignment, another is that students do not explain the assignment for whatever reason (they themselves do not understand the assignment, or they did not bring the assignment description), and a third is that frequently students are unable to ask the right questions in order to advance their understanding of the assignment so that they can improve their work independently. Consequently, tutors typically fix surface errors, such as grammatical mistakes, thinking that good grammar in an assignment will result in a good grade for students. The dichotomy between challenge and remediation is clear in this situation.

Furthermore, the corollary issue of who is responsible for student motivation to learn generated divergent views. During the focus group, Kaylee and Sami debated this point, with Kaylee taking the position that each student is responsible for his or her own motivation to learn and Sami arguing that teachers should take an active role in promoting student motivation. Kofu refereed this debate by offering a middle ground to bring students and teachers together in creating a mutually advantageous learning environment.

**HEARING VS. DEAF TEACHERS**

The preference for deaf teachers over hearing teachers was a strong theme among the informants in this study. This preference seemed to be founded on several principles. The primary reason seemed to be the notion that, by virtue of being part of the same
minority group as the students, deaf faculty members better understood the students’ experiences, perceptions, and needs and therefore were better positioned to help the students learn academic English in college. In other words, deaf students trusted deaf faculty in a way they did not trust hearing faculty.

A corollary reason for this preference was based on communication: the deaf faculty were perceived to be effective communicators compared with the hearing faculty. The competence in American Sign Language and sign language in general demonstrated by the deaf faculty apparently enabled their students to understand them as well as to feel that the faculty understood them in turn. In other words, the deaf faculty’s expressive and receptive communication skills were judged to be more effective and successful than their hearing counterparts’, according to my informants. Furthermore, the fact that they were English teachers seemed to confer upon them in the students’ eyes a sort of certification that they were expert in this field, which the students trusted. Not only were the deaf faculty apparently more effective at explaining concepts, they evidently were able to more fully understand what their students were telling them, both from a language and a shared experiences standpoint.

A third corollary principle behind the informants’ preference seems to be related to the perception of the informants that their hearing teachers were more prone to patronizing them. This patronizing behavior was manifested in a variety of ways, including a lack of patience for deaf students’ instructional needs, which Zara discussed, and a mismatch in cultural understanding, exemplified by Sami’s long narrative about the cultural conflict she experienced with her hearing teacher who used the phrase “too bad,” which resulted in an argument and a failing grade.
The preference for deaf teachers over hearing teachers applied specifically in cases where hearing teachers taught sections of courses designed specifically for deaf students. In instances where deaf students worked with hearing people who did not use sign language, such as in mainstream courses (where typically an interpreter is present to facilitate communication) or at the Academic Support Center (the mainstream tutoring center on campus), my informants showed a different attitude. John Doe remarked that the teachers of mainstream sections were less concerned with grammatical problems in students’ writing, focusing more on the content and the ideas in the texts, which he viewed positively. Sami went to the ASC as an exercise in preparing for the hearing world by working with tutors there who did not sign. She seemed in this case to have suspended her expectations for communication and focused on the task before her, whereas in her classes where instructors sign for themselves, she was more demanding that her instructors communicate directly and effectively with her.

A difference in the type and quality of assistance received at the ASC and at the NTID Learning Center (NLC) also was observed by some informants, particularly Sami. She seems to have felt that the ASC tutors were more aggressive in working with her toward a higher level of academic English in her writing, whereas she perceived that the NLC tutors were more forgiving of grammatical mistakes, implying to her a different standard of help. In this case, Sami shows a contradictory world view: she wanted help to attain standard academic English, but she struggled with the associated reading and world knowledge requirements needed to get there, and yet she criticized the people most sympathetic to her circumstances.
**LEARNING STYLES**

The issue of how deaf students learn most effectively arose during this study. Several informants expressed an appreciation for and a level of comfort with learning situations that did not rely on traditional classroom experiences, particularly written English and lectures. These informants enjoyed group discussions with their deaf peers, where they could use ASL and communicate directly in a visual way. For informants like Mark, Zara, Sami, and Joseph, these kinds of interactive, content-based learning opportunities enabled them to feel as if they were bridging toward greater competence in academic English.

**CONFLICT AND RESOLUTION**

Communication difficulties arose in the experiences of several informants, manifesting in a variety of ways. Zara complained about the poor sign skills of some hearing teachers she knew, blaming them for ineffective communication and therefore ineffective teaching. In her mind, these people's poor sign skills prevented student access to course content. For Sami, the communication challenges were not only linguistic (as in Zara’s case), but also cultural. In her case, her teachers could not understand her ASL, and she could not understand their English, which resulted in an inadequate learning experience for her as well as misunderstandings that created bad feelings. Kofu discussed his communication conflicts in the context of his teachers not only being unable to understand his sign language, but also unable or unwilling to understand his deep motivation and faith in himself.

The resolution in each of these cases ended up with the informant feeling subjugated in some way.
**Expectations**

Unrealistic and unfair expectations with regard to English competency were part of a theme that arose throughout this study. Zara made the point that deaf students should not be held to exactly the same standards of English competency as hearing students, given their backgrounds, but she did acknowledge that a certain degree of academic literacy was expected as part of the process of getting a college degree. Kaylee raised the point that some teachers seemed to expect a specific type of writing style and were not open to students’ creativity within that framework, but this comment came from a highly competent English user, not someone who needed the guidance of essay rubrics like some of the other informants.

The dichotomy in this area is that students perceive themselves to be working extremely hard in their efforts to meet their English course requirements, and when these efforts were not rewarded with passing or good grades, they felt betrayed in some way. Their perception seemed to be that if they put enough effort into the coursework, their product must then be acceptable, and when it did not receive a grade commensurate with their effort, a conflict was experienced. Confounding this situation is the fact that many deaf students arrive in college with the perception that because they have been accepted to college, they are therefore certified to be ready for college work. Furthermore, their perception of their skills is located within their efforts to succeed rather than in an understanding of the implications of their scholastic assessment scores relative to the traditional expectations of the academy.
RECONSIDER ACADEMIC ENGLISH LITERACY

I have already advocated strongly throughout this dissertation for teachers (and I would hope, parents) to listen to their deaf students and try to find ways to facilitate the success of the current generation of deaf students in college. However, I am not advocating for lowering standards. I do believe that many of the standards applied to deaf students are inappropriate on many levels. One significant standard is that of expecting deaf students to achieve perfect English grammar. This is not realistic within the short timeframe available to students in college. Another is the expectation that deaf students will demonstrate the same kinds of thoughts that hearing students do. This also is not realistic given the early information input experienced by deaf students, particularly those who do not learn to read well at an early age. A third is expecting deaf students to remediate their skills quickly. As we know from Shaughnessy’s writing 40 years ago, disadvantaged hearing students at that time could not catch up to their peers in their first year of college, so expecting a commensurate achievement from deaf students, in light of their typical pre-college learning experiences, is even more unrealistic and unfair.

Hearing students theoretically can improve more easily than deaf students simply because they have auditory access to the spoken language that is expressed in writing, an access denied or very limited to deaf students, and can continue to progress through the college curriculum. As Cummins explains, “The major reason for the longer time span required to attain age-appropriate L2 cognitive/academic proficiency in comparison to conversational L2 proficiency is that native-speakers are not standing still waiting for minority students to catch up (Cummins, 1984, p. 135).” So to expect deaf students to
achieve the same standard of no error in as short a timeframe as their hearing peers is simply not fair or realistic.

However, success is entirely possible if the parameters of academic English literacy are reconsidered and redefined in the spirit of honestly assessing the skills that will be needed by deaf students to succeed in college and at work. Deaf students experience a deep contradiction in their college English classes as they seek access to the same opportunities as their hearing peers, but also need special dispensations in certain circumstances, raising the ethical issue of which definition of literacy to apply. Kliewer has identified two broad definitions of literacy, “The first regarded reading as conformity to a hierarchy of psychologically-deduced subskills.... The second definition regarded literacy as the construction of shared meaning in specific contexts (1998).” In their observations, Sami and Zara essentially argued for a redefinition of the literacy expected in their college English classes to that of “construction of shared meaning in specific contexts.” Their position seemed to be that in an environment designed to promote access and opportunities for deaf people, the standards of achievement and associated definitions should be reconsidered in a manner that supports deaf students’ achievement in meaningful ways. As Kliewer explains, “Restructuring must also involve redefining literacy from a consequence of isolated subskill mastery to a tool for communication. In doing so, teachers have turned written language into a path students might choose to solve problems, accomplish learning goals, express emotions, empathize with peers, gather and convey information, form friendships, and resolve conflicts (Kliewer, 1998).”
RECOMMENDATIONS

Restructuring the college academic English learning experience for deaf students will require curricular modification and time. According to Cummins and Collier, language proficiency in school requires that students be given the additional time they need to reach competency commensurate with that of their age peers (Collier, 1995; Cummins, 1984). As Collier explains,

An adolescent entering college must acquire enormous amounts of vocabulary in every discipline of study and continue the acquisition of complex writing skills, processes that continue throughout our adult life as we add new contexts of language use to our life experience.... Thus first language acquisition is an unending process throughout our lifetime. Second language acquisition is an equally complex phenomenon.... However, second language acquisition is more subject to influence from other factors than was oral development in our first language. When the context of second language use is school, a very deep level of proficiency is required (Collier, 1995, p. 4).

According to Collier, the following programmatic strategies based on extensive research can dramatically improve student achievement:

1) second language taught through academic content; 2) conscious focus on teaching learning strategies needed to develop thinking skills and problem-solving abilities, and 3) continuous support for staff development emphasizing activation of students’ prior knowledge, respect for students’ home language and culture, cooperative, learning, interactive and discovery learning, intense and
meaningful cognitive/academic development, and ongoing assessment using multiple measures (Collier, 1995, p. 9)

My informants’ narratives endorse many of Collier’s strategies. In particular, they enjoyed group discussions and similar highly interactive learning experiences in their classes. They also spoke to the concept that their teachers should be skilled in effectively teaching them and communicating with them as well as being sensitive to their challenges as deaf people negotiating a hearing world. Their frustration at being assessed negatively also emerged in their interviews, attesting to the notion that stigmatization is alive and well.

The movement toward curricular change designed to promote enhanced language learning and use is not limited to ESL students. Cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary writing is a topic of much discussion in higher education, and the attitude that best exemplifies an approach that would benefit all students, not just deaf students like my informants, is one that assigns responsibility for successful learning to all teachers across all disciplines. “A first-year seminar program rich in language activities suggests fertile links between writing and speaking. It suggests writing is a complicated linguistic and social activity central to human learning and understanding. And it suggests that the shared responsibility for good writing, as for good learning, extends to every department and every course (Runciman, 1998, p. 52).”

LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH
A major limitation of this research study is that teachers were not interviewed. Understanding teachers’ perspectives on the themes and circumstances that my informants
describe would provide a fuller picture of the academic English literacy paradigm under investigation and enable reconciliation of divergent views.

**Future Research**

Future research efforts should investigate teacher perspectives on the academic English literacy acquisition experiences in the classroom and other circumstances involving interaction with deaf college students.

As of this writing, students at this university are grouped into three categories: BS and beyond, AAS, and AOS. This study did not attempt to differentiate among the three groups of students in revealing the experiences of informants, but such differentiation might reveal further patterns or themes.

Furthermore, the informants of this study represent one generation of deaf students. Future generations may experience different experiences than this generation because many more children are receiving cochlear implants and receiving intensive auditory training that may or may not enhance their ability to acquire English as a native language. Research shows promise for better standardized testing results with such deaf children, but their potential academic English literacy acquisition experiences have yet to be investigated.
APPENDIX

Questions for the one-on-one interviews:

1. Tell me about your English background in college. What courses have you taken, and where?
2. Can you describe your academic English learning experience in these schools? Tell me what your classes, teachers, and tutoring experiences were like. What were the activities in these situations? How did you feel about them?
3. Is learning English easy or hard for you?
4. What aspects of learning English do you enjoy?
5. What aspects of learning English do you dislike?
6. Can you tell me about any experiences or strategies or methods you feel helped you learn English in college?
7. Tell me a story about a teacher whom you remember having a significant effect on your English learning experience in college.

Questions for the follow-up interviews:

You told me last time about your academic English literacy learning experience at RIT, and I feel I have a good picture of that. Now that you’ve had some time to think about our conversation, I have a couple of other areas I want you to think about. These areas are focused on expectations (what you/we hope to happen) and reality (what really happened).
1. What would you say that people IN GENERAL, not just at RIT, expect of deaf students in English courses? What do they expect deaf students to do? This is a very general question, and I'm very interested in your answers.

2. While you were a student in English courses at RIT, what did you think your teachers expected of you? Again, you can tell me whatever comes to your mind.

3. Do you feel you understood these expectations?

4. What did your fellow classmates expect of you?

5. What did you expect of your classmates?

6. What did you expect of your teachers?

7. Now that you’ve thought about these expectations, can you tell me what changed for you after you actually experienced being a student in RIT English courses?

8. Can you tell me about your classmates’ communication strategies?

9. Can you tell me about your classmates’ attitudes in these classes?

10. What about YOUR communication strategies? We talked about your attitude last time, but you can elaborate if you want.

11. Do you want to talk more about your teachers’ communication strategies? Or their attitudes?

The script for the focus group event follows:

Please introduce yourselves by telling us your name, hometown, major, and what English courses you have already taken or are now taking.

We will watch a videotape of a deaf student in a writing conference with his/her teacher. As you watch, please think back to your own experiences in college with English classes and teachers.
What is your first reaction to what you saw on the videotape?

How is what you saw similar to or different from your personal experience?

Can you tell us how your own experience compares with the other participants’ comments?
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