FastFacts

Sign Language Interpreters : Using Interpreters as a Reasonable Accommodation for Testing

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Overview

Regardless of one's role in administering an assessment--as a professor in a college course or a psychological examiner conducting an evaluation-- test providers recognize the importance of obtaining an accurate measurement of student learning, knowledge, abilities, attitudes, and skills.

It is well known that that language and structure of tests can present barriers to those who do not have a strong language base in English. In fact, extensive psychometric protocols are always employed when high stakes tests (e.g., personality tests, college entrance exams, etc.) are developed because it is known that test outcomes are influenced by the test taker's language proficiency and cultural experiences.

While academic course exams usually do not undergo such psychometric scrutiny, the goals are the same – to accurately assess the student's learning rather than their language and test-taking abilities.

Do individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing experience English language challenges?

Though not every individual who is deaf or hard of hearing struggles with the English language, it is not uncommon for some individuals to experience difficulty mastering English. Challenges in English language acquisition occur for a variety of reasons.
A deaf child's first exposure to English may not occur until enrollment in school, with little or no incidental learning occurring prior to that time. With only approximately 30% of English sounds being visible on the lips, learning English orally (rather than as a second language) can result in gaps. The construct of English has little similarity to American Sign Language (ASL) in that English is a linear language rooted in phonetics, where one sound follows another sound, not unlike the cars of a train.

Conversely, ASL is a visual language that uses space to convey concepts.

According to Gallaudet University, deaf students are second language English users, with the second language using a different alphabet. "Anyone who has a first language that has a written system that's very different than English, like Arabic or Chinese or Russian, knows that learning to recognize and understand words in English is much more challenging than if you already speak a language that uses the same orthography."[ii]

Is providing an interpreter for testing considered an expected reasonable accommodation?

There is no simple answer to this question. While providing a sign language interpreter in this setting is considered a reasonable accommodation, it really does *depend*. It depends upon the purpose of the test, assignment or other activity. It depends upon the type and complexity of the course content, and it depends upon the individual's language proficiency and academic experience. Granting test accommodation should be done on a test-by-test basis centered upon these factors.

What are some examples of when and how to provide signed tests?

In all cases, an interpreter should be available in the classroom (or testing site) to interpret instructions, new information and comments shared by the instructor, as well as questions posed by students, including the student who is deaf or hard of hearing.

Whether or not an interpreter should be used to interpret test items depends on a number of factors as they pertain to the test's purpose. Is the test:

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* Measuring *content knowledge?* If the purpose of the test or activity is to measure content knowledge (e.g., the fall of the Alamo), a signed language-administered test should be considered. In the case of multiple choice, true/false and short answer, the interpreter signs the questions and the student places their answers on the test or answer sheet. In the case of essay questions, consider having the student video their live responses and then have one or more highly qualified interpreters voice the video when the response is being scored.

* Measuring *reading skills?* If the purpose of the assessment is to measure a student's skill in reading, specifically decoding English text, then no interpreting of the test item should be provided. However, a grey area often exists when there is also a reading comprehension task that relies on how an individual analyzes and uses written text to arrive at an answer. In this instance, creativity may be needed to determine how to make this type of test question accessible without losing its validity.

* Measuring *written English expression?* If the purpose of the assignment is to measure skills in written English expression, then no accommodation should be provided. This is the case in many state assessments of language proficiency. The prompt should be provided via an interpreter, but the student response should be in written English without an interpreter.

Policies regarding the interpreting of tests set forth by institutions or agencies vary greatly. The goal of these policies, though, is consistent: to achieve equal access while ensuring that the administration of the test in another language (ASL) does not compromise the validity of the score.

Are there other factors to be considered in terms of interpreting tests?

Currently, there are no universal or best practice models or policies ascribed to the actual process of interpreting tests. However, it is important to keep in mind the following.

* Utilize only interpreters with a strong fluency in both ASL and English, and who are familiar with the test content and terminology, including acronyms.
* Use a check and balance system, such as team interpreting, to generate higher linguistic accuracy and interpreter neutrality in the process.
* Work together with the interpreter to determine what content can be interpreted or how it should be presented.

For more information regarding sign language interpreters, please see pn2's Fast Facts titled *Sign Language Interpreters: An Overview, Sign Language Interpreters: Hiring Qualified Interpreters, Sign Language Interpreters: In the Classroom, and Dual Accommodation: Using Interpreters and Speech-to- Text Services.*

Resources

Pepnet2- Test Equality for Individuals who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing www.pepnet.org/testequity

Guidelines for the Development of American Sign Language Versions of Academic Test Content for K-12 Students www.nimbletools.com/gaap

References

[i]"Hard of Hearing Support Services." *DEAF C.A.N!* Web. http://deafcan.org/hohss.

[ii]"A New Reason for Why the Deaf May Have Trouble Reading." *VOA*. 21 Apr. 2011. Web. http://learningenglish.voanews.com/content/a-new-reason-for-why-the-deaf-may-have-trouble-reading 119728279/115194.html

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