The Rewarding Challenges of Teaching Hearing-Impaired Students

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INTRODUCTION

Having a hearing-impaired student in the classroom for the first time is a new and challenging experience for any teacher, given that it is the responsibility of the teacher to set the pace, tone and atmosphere for the students to learn. It is also the responsibility to enforce a disciplinary code in the classroom, and it is the responsibility of each student to obey the disciplinary code. This also applies to all students, whether they have a disability or not, including the hearing-impaired students.

In CELE (the Center for English Language Education), it is rare to have completely deaf students, but there are usually a number of hearing-impaired students with every freshman intake. Teaching hearing-impaired students presents unique challenges. However, it is extremely rewarding as the teacher can make a difference in the lives of these students and help them achieve their goals of learning English as a Second Language.

Teachers who volunteer or are chosen to teach hearing-impaired students may feel uncertain or anxious as to how they will teach them. The purpose of this paper is to assist them in overcoming such uncertainty and anxiety through the realization that it is possible to communicate with these students, and make positive changes in their lives.

DEFINITION OF A HEARING-IMPAIRED STUDENT

Hearing loss is defined as the loss in the quantity and quality of hearing capacity with regard to loudness (measured in decibels) and across a range (which is measured in frequencies). A hearing-impaired student is not a deaf student, but the amount of hearing loss does vary from mild to severe. While a deaf student is someone whose inability to hear makes it impossible to understand everyday speech, a hearing-impaired student is someone whose hearing loss makes it very challenging, however not impossible, to understand such speech without the use of hearing aids, or by other means such as sign language and by lip-reading. A hearing-impaired student could thus be said to have a hearing impediment, which could be permanent or temporary, and while this has the potential to impact negatively on his or her educational performance, it does not necessarily have to for reasons that will be discussed in this paper.
SOME POPULAR MYTHS ABOUT HEARING-IMPAIRED STUDENTS

It is an unfortunate fact that there is considerable misunderstanding based on ignorance about hearing-impaired students, and it is possible that the anxiety that is generated among teachers knowing that they will have hearing-impaired students in their classes that is in part responsible for this. The following are just some of the most general misconceptions:

- Hearing-impaired students are mute and lack the ability to speak (the truth is that hearing-impaired students can come to understand and speak a language to some degree despite having a barrier to so called ‘normal’ language learning)
- Sign language retards so called ‘normal’ language learning (the truth is that whilst sign language does provide an alternative to spoken language, it should be accepted as combination of manual and oral methods which does not detract from being an effective way of teaching)
- Students with hearing aids can hear normally, and therefore the solution merely lies in having the students acquire good hearing aids (the truth is that hearing aids only serve to amplify sound, and do not promote so called ‘normal’ hearing. In addition hearing aids block out other sounds which are essential for conversation often making it even more challenging for hearing-impaired students)
- Hearing-impaired students learn to lip-read more easily than normal hearing people, in the same way that blind people tend to develop a greater sense of touch, and therefore the solution to communicating with them lies merely in speaking with clear lip movements (the truth is that less communication actually comes from the lips while most is conveyed in facial expressions, hand gestures and body language. It could be said though that hearing-impaired students make more effort to lip-read)

POINTS TO CONSIDER WHEN TEACHING HEARING-IMPAIRED STUDENTS

As a teacher of hearing-impaired students it is important to bear in mind continuously that hearing-impaired students rely very much on their vision to understand what the teacher and the other students are saying. The following points are therefore useful to the teacher to be aware of:

- Have the students sit where it is easiest for them to see you, and this is usually in the front of the classroom
- Do not stand in front of a strong light source, such as a window or a bright light, as this casts a shadow over one’s face, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, for them to lip-read you
- Speak only at times that the students can actually see your face, and avoid speaking while turning to write on the blackboard or walking around the back of the classroom. It is best to write on the blackboard first and then to turn around and be specific by pointing to the words and sentences
- Make sure that nothing blocks your face, thus it is better to stand to the side of overhead projectors rather than behind them, and microphones should be held below your mouth so that it does not hinder lip-reading. In addition, if you dim the lights to use an overhead projector make sure that the lighting is still adequate enough for the students to see your
lips. If you have a moustache keep it well trimmed, in fact it is preferable not to have a moustache or beard at all
- Use facial expressions, gestures and natural body language as much as possible but at the same time avoid exaggerating lip movements and volume. Speak naturally at a reasonable and modest pace, and the students will usually let you know if they wish you to speak more slowly, or if they want you to repeat anything.
- If something cannot be understood after every attempt has been made it is appropriate to communicate with written notes. When reading aloud it is important that the teacher be sensitive to the fact that the hearing-impaired students may not be able to keep up with the teacher or with the rest of the class. One needs to be sensitive of their needs at all times whilst simultaneously not drawing too much attention to them, which could make them feel uncomfortable and stressed. It is important to accommodate hard of hearing students in such a way so as to enable them to participate in the classroom on an equal basis. This is easier said than done, but with practice it is possible
- Use visual aids as much as possible. When using videos it is best that they be captioned in English that is large enough for them to read easily. When using CDs or cassettes they should be given photocopied transcripts (which are usually available at the back of teachers’ books). It should be remembered, however, that receiving information visually could be tiring and cause eye fatigue for the hearing-impaired student so it is also good to remember to give them breaks from time to time. It is also not ideal to speak to the students while having them read something, as they will be overloaded in the task and become stressed. The use of technology, such as computers with spelling and grammar checkers, and electronic dictionaries should also be encouraged as much as possible
- It could also be a good idea to arrange the desks in a semicircle in small classrooms as this will help the hearing-impaired students see the faces of the other students as well as your own which facilitates classroom communication, and make the hearing-impaired students fell less isolated and thereby less alienated from their environment
- It is also helpful when asking for responses to request students to raise their hands, rather that shout answers out, as this allows the hearing-impaired students more opportunities to participate. It is useful for the teacher to repeat questions from students in the class before responding, as the hearing-impaired students may have missed parts of what was said by the other students and not know what is going on
- Remember that while despite being hearing-impaired, such students are usually very sensitive to background noise. This is especially the case for students with hearing aids. The background noise should be kept to a minimum, as it tends to disguise speech with its poor acoustics and echoes (chairs moving, air-conditioning and fan motors running and students talking)
- Ultimately, having hearing-impaired students in your classroom means much more work for the teacher given the consideration that must be given to them. However, I have found that their positive attitude and motivation more than makes up for the extra work involved

**USING TRANSCRIPTS**

As mentioned above, it is helpful to give students transcripts when doing listening exercises with the class. They can read the transcripts while the other students are listening. An example
of such a transcript that I used is the following, from the Firsthand Success: Beginners’ Course Teacher’s Manual (2000, TS1):

*Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to “Passion for Fashion” This year’s theme is Mix and Match.*

*And here comes Jade. She’s wearing a flowered scarf tied around her head. With that flowered scarf, Jade is wearing a solid white, long-sleeved blouse and a plain black skirt. She’s also wearing a solid black belt which matches her shoes. Every woman looks wonderful in a solid white blouse and black skirt. The black belt and shoes are the perfect match. Thank you Jade.*

*Next is Austin. He is wearing checked pants and a checked jacket. With his checked pants and a checked jacket, he’s wearing a striped sweater vest. Under the striped vest, he is wearing a plain short-sleeved shirt and a solid tie. That’s right folks – checked pants and jacket with a striped short sleeved vest and a solid shirt and tie. You’re looking very handsome Austin. Thank you.*

*Here comes Emma. She’s wearing wonderful plaid pants. With those plaid pants, she’s wearing a solid gray coat. She’s also wearing a beautiful polka-dotted scarf. Some might say that plaid pants, a solid gray coat and a polka-dotted scarf is too much. But we think polka dots, plaid and plain make a beautiful fashion statement for Emma. Thank you Emma.*

Then the hearing-impaired students along with the other students were be tested as follows in the test that I created:

1. The name of the fashion parade is
   - [Fashion for Passion] [Passion for Fashion] [Fashion for Fashion]
2. This year’s theme is
   - [Match and Mix] [Match and Match] [Mix and Match]
3. Jade’s solid black belt matches her
   - [black shirt] [shoes] [flowered scarf]
4. Austin is wearing a ______ under his striped vest
   - [solid tie] [checked jacket] [checked pants]
5. What kind of a coat is Emma wearing?
   - [plaid] [polka dotted] [solid gray]

In this way the hearing-impaired students are made to feel a part of the class as it draws them into the activity along with the other students.

**SHOULD EFL TEACHERS USE SIGN LANGUAGE?**

While it can be useful for a teacher of hearing-impaired students to learn sign language, it is not necessary in the case when they have such students occasionally (as in the case of CELE). It is nevertheless important, especially in writing exercises, to be aware of the linguistic differences between sign language and spoken or written English. This is because written
English (even more so than spoken English) presents specific challenges to students who are hearing-impaired. Downs, Owen and Vammen (2000, pp. 11 – 12) list the following differentiations between American Sign Language (ASL) and English:

- Plurals are signified in a variety of ways in ASL, whereas English adds an ‘s’ on nouns and verbs
- In ASL the adjective is usually after the noun (just as occurs in Spanish, French and other spoken languages), whereas in English, the reverse is true
- In English verbs are conjugated to include past, present or future. Tense is highly developed in ASL as well, however not with verb conjugations. In ASL, only one form of verbs is used. This is handled by establishing the time frame first, and then all subsequent verbs will remain in that tense until the signer changes the time frame
- No two languages have exact word-to-word equivalents. One sign in ASL can mean several different words in English, just as one word in English can be translated into several different signs in ASL
- ASL does not have the verb ‘to be’. ASL, like many other languages, indicates this information in other ways

For these reasons, it is important to note that hearing-impaired students do not mentally process language in the same manner as ‘second language’ students. Given that hearing-impaired students rely heavily on visual aids (such as ASL) for the processing of data it is believed to take place in a different hemisphere of the brain, and hence they have to adapt to different ways of learning both written and spoken language.

There is a Japanese form of sign language that differs from ASL, and whilst it would undoubtedly be advantageous to have a Japanese interpreter in the classroom, it would also be an expensive undertaking. If CELE were to have a significant number of hearing-impaired students to warrant this (perhaps by joining all the hearing-impaired students into one class) it could work, but I have found that with only one or two in my classroom this would not be ideal. It could also prove a distraction to the other students. Still, if films are shown in the classroom, it could be very useful for an interpreter to interpret the film, but this would be a rare occasion.

**NOTE TAKING**

More useful however, is to appoint a note taker as a supplement to classroom learning, as students who are hearing-impaired have difficulty taking their own notes. This is especially so when they try to lip-read the teacher or the other students and write simultaneously.

There are various ways in which note taking can be undertaken. Usually, the hearing-impaired student and another student will make notes together when communication is difficult. However, the teacher can also assign another student to take notes for the hearing-impaired student. The teacher could also ask another student to volunteer to take notes for the hearing-impaired student from time to time. The teacher can also share his notes with the hearing-impaired student, or make photocopies of them before the class and give them to the students. I have noticed my hearing-impaired students doing quite well with lip-reading and only resort
to exchanging notes if the communication totally breaks down. I have also noticed that students who are not hearing-impaired actually understand the hearing-impaired students better than the other students given that hearing-impaired students tend to use clearer lip movements, in addition to making more gestures and using more effective body language.

**TAPE RECORDINGS**

Whilst some teachers may feel uncomfortable about having their classes taped (or videoed), it is often a feasible and sensible solution for the hearing-impaired student to use it later in order to play it back to recall what occurred in the classroom. It would help overcome the fact that such students have to attend to many things simultaneously, and can so easily miss certain points that were made in the classroom. Whilst most hearing-impaired students struggle with keeping up with classroom activities, they would be able to listen to or look at a tape recording if it is clear and they have a good earphone. They can replay it until they are clear about what happened in the class. This is useful because most hearing aids have the drawback of cutting off all other sounds in the classroom, such as discussions and questions by other students. It could also be possible for certain parts of the recording to be transcribed into written format, as a particularly frustrating part for hearing-impaired students is dealing with gaps in information.

**CLASSROOM AND UNIVERSITY SUPPORT FOR HEARING-IMPAIRED STUDENTS**

It is important as a teacher to obtain feedback from the hearing-impaired student at every opportunity as an indicator of their level of understanding, in addition to their level of well-being. Sometimes shy hearing-impaired students will “feign” that they comprehend you which results in them losing out on certain things that the teacher merely assumes they do understand.

It is also important to remember that impairment in hearing is an invisible phenomenon, and therefore it is very easy for teachers to overlook it and assume that everything is fine, but the student may be experiencing a growing gap in understanding which negatively affects their well being, adds to their stress levels and has a detrimental affect on their learning. Teachers should be vigilant enough to spot problems when they are small and deal with them effectively before they get out of hand. Equally important is to encourage hearing-impaired students to divulge what they do not understand via obtaining feedback from them. A hearing-impaired student needs to know if what they are doing is considered good or not, and how the teacher thinks of them. They need more praise than other students generally given that it is very easy for them to harbor feelings of isolation. In this sense it is good to get to know your hearing-impaired student on a personal basis, such as taking an interest in their hobbies and things that are important in their lives. This will help these students to trust you enough to tell you if there is a problem lurking beneath the surface.

It is important to give the hearing-impaired students a sense of belonging, and it is therefore necessary to assist them in building a social network on campus. A number of sample
questions that can be asked to hearing-impaired students could be the following:

- Do you have any friends or companions on the campus?
- Do you know the other hearing-impaired students and do you share time together?
- Are you involved in any societies on the campus, such as sports or cultural clubs?
- If you could change some things about the classroom or campus, what would they be?
- Do you feel comfortable letting me know when you need help?
- What could I do, as your teacher, to make your life easier?
- Is there anything you would like more of, or less of, in the classroom?

**READING**

Reading is a very useful means for hearing-impaired students to get as much practice with English as possible, and it is important to adapt the reading materials to the appropriate reading level of the student. It is also good if the reading materials have as many visual aspects, such as pictures, figures and diagrams, to keep it as interesting as possible. If the reading material has a taped transcript it is most ideal, providing the hearing-impaired student is able to hear it. Reading can also be done as homework with set questions for the student to answer.

**WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

Writing is another useful means for hearing-impaired students, and these can also be based on summaries of the reading and other classroom work. It is vital that the topic is clearly explained so that the students know exactly what is required of them, including the length of the written work.

As teachers it is therefore useful to consider the following with regard to reading and writing assignments to hearing-impaired students:

- Assignments (writing as well as other assignments) should be given in written form, preferably in the form of handouts to avoid the possibility of confusion and misunderstandings as to what is required and when the deadlines are. What is expected (for example, how many pages) and what will be allowed and not allowed should be clear and precise.
- Meet with the students personally before the assignment is due so that what is expected can be clarified and no misunderstandings exist. Encourage and praise at every opportunity.
- Check their progress regularly and allow for rewrites before the due date if necessary. It is important never to criticize a hearing-impaired student in front of other students, or to get angry with them in front of others. If the rare case of disciplinary action needing to be taken, it should be done in the most discreet manner possible and in private. However, this has never been necessary in my experience with hearing-impaired students given their intrinsic motivation.
FLASH CARDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY

Flash cards are also an especially effective approach of using a visual learning aid with hearing-impaired students, given that visual aspects play an important role in their learning process. Another dimension here is the use of photography as a motivating factor, and as something that they can easily identify with. It is also a way in which the teacher can show an interest in their lives and discover what is significant in their lives.

Photography can expose hearing-impaired students, and their teachers and classmates, to a multiplicity of new experiences, and if used in the classroom they can also be used as a means of recording their learning experiences. Action pictures can be taken of the students in their natural settings or in the classroom. They could also take their own photographs of their own life experiences. This can then be followed by class discussions and can be used as the basis of assignments. New words pertaining to the photographs can be introduced, and the students could be encouraged to form sentences with them.

CALL (COMPUTER ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING)

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is related to the use of computers for language teaching and learning. Computers can be a very effective means of learning for the hearing-impaired student given that it has a powerful self-access facility and gives the hearing-impaired student the freedom of choice. They are also sensitive to the student’s level of proficiency. They can serve as a very effective complementary tool for the hearing-impaired student. I did not use the computer labs with my hearing-impaired students, but in retrospect I feel that it would have been a good idea. Much variety exists on the Internet, and the following are merely some of the many that exist:

- Activities for ESL Students at http://a4esl.org/ (this website contains hundreds of Quizzes, tests, exercises and puzzles to help students learn English as a Second Language). This website makes use of HTML, JavaScript, and Flash quizzes (as do many other websites) and these are very useful to hearing-impaired students due to their visual content.
- Dave’s ESL Café at http://www.eslcafe.com/ (Dave's ESL Cafe has a large number of resources for ESL teaching such as discussion forums for teachers and students; interactive quizzes; and pages for learning idioms, slang, and phrasal verbs)
- Interesting Things for ESL Students at http://www.manythings.org/ (contains word games, puzzles, quizzes, exercises, slang and proverbs)

The activities in these websites, and many others, provide multiple choice, open answer, true/false, and matching and cloze exercises.

- In addition, there is also a very good reading/writing website called My Own Resources at http://miguelmllop.com/ (contains many reading exercises, each with its own required compositions based on the stories)
MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF TEACHING HEARING-IMPAIRED STUDENTS

I had the pleasure of teaching three hearing-impaired students in 2004. Two were in my International Relations 14 class. The other was in my Law 20 class.

I volunteered to have these students in my class as a learning experience as a teacher but soon after committing myself to the task I worried whether I’d be able to teach them. I was also worried about whether they would feel comfortable, and whether they would be able to cope with the tasks. However, I was very impressed as they were excellent students, and considerably above the average.

Teaching them was a pleasure because they were most enthusiastic and understood my instructions very clearly, especially through lip-reading. They always sat at the front of the class (so that they can see me clearly) and watched me very carefully as I explained the tasks. They could understand very clearly and could do the tasks (including the conversational tasks) thoroughly and with much enthusiasm. They were a motivating factor in the classroom, and I noticed many other students following their example of making a sincere effort to communicate in English. I used a lot of group work where they circulated among the other students for approximately three minutes at a time. Wherever there was difficulty in understanding a quick note would be written and the communication always continued without problems. The other students in the classroom were also very nice and polite to the hearing-impaired students and this helped make them feel a part of the class.

They all relied very much on their vision to understand what I or the other students were saying. I therefore tried to avoid speaking when they could not see my face, which applied to both writing on the blackboard and walking around the room (I tried not speak with my back to the class when they would not know that I was saying). I also tried not to stand in front of the window at the back of the classroom, as the glare from behind made it difficult for them to see my face. I used facial expressions, gestures and natural body language as much as possible but also tried to avoid exaggerated lip movements or volume. I must admit that although I was aware of such things from having read information on the Internet and speaking with other teachers who had taught hearing-impaired students in the past, it was nevertheless difficult to change my teaching-style initially to accommodate the needs of the hearing-impaired students in the classroom. Perhaps the reason for this was that over the years I had become accustomed to certain ways of teaching (ways that worked with students who were not hearing-impaired), and so it was challenging to maintain ways that I was used to and adjust them to having hearing-impaired students in the classroom for the first time. After a couple of weeks, I did feel that I had adjusted my style, and that I had grown more used to the fact that I needed to take more into consideration the needs of the hearing-impaired students.

I therefore tried to use visual aids as much as possible (much more than I had used before), and when playing the CD I also give them copies of the transcripts (as mentioned earlier). When I referring to items on the blackboard I tried to be as specific as possible by pointing. This was not always easy to do, and sometimes I would forget to be as specific as I needed to be. However, I was pleased by the fact that the hearing-impaired students also seemed to be
less inhibited than the other students to put up their hands and ask for clarification when they could not understand something more fully. They were not shy students. When using videos I always made sure that I used English captioned videos. I could not, and therefore did not use sign language (although I intended to learn it at some point) but I found this not to be an impediment to communication. It was important to get their attention before speaking, such as a light touch on the shoulder or a wave, as they become very engaged in making communication or understanding things so their attention becomes very focused on specific things. However, they were extremely cooperative, and would immediately give me their attention following a slight tap on the shoulder.

As mentioned, the other students also had no problems understanding them, and if they did not understand something they would write it on paper. I also wrote things on the blackboard to make sure that they understood (much more so than with other classes where there were no hearing-impaired students). Since I had these students I noticed that I had been doing a lot more writing on the blackboard. I think the other students appreciated it too. When questions are asked by other students I repeated the questions, and often wrote them on the blackboard so that they were sure to know what was being asked.

They had a positive impact on the whole class because of their friendly personalities and their positive outlooks. They made friends with all the students, and they especially enjoyed the conversation activities that are always very lively and cheerful. They liked to be treated the same as the other students.

One particular thing I noticed was that they did not have the “katakana” pronunciation that so many other students have, and which is very hard to overcome. The English they spoke was clear with good pronunciation and the other students had no problem in understanding them, and in fact benefited from hearing the way they spoke. They had no problem understanding the other students as well, because they lip-read well, and they encouraged the other students to use more body language, especially gestures, which are an important part of speaking English.

We had regular speaking tests and they generally had higher than above average scores as they were very communicative, in the sense that they could both understand and be understood, and the other students made sure that they spoke clearly and made appropriate gestures.

They were very intelligent and conscientious about doing well in English. They were often the first to enter the classroom and the last to leave. They often chatted with me after class and asked questions about learning English. They received top scores at the end of the first semester. After that two went on to the AUAP (Asia University American Program) and the other went to a higher-level class, as he wanted a greater challenge in his English studies. His proficiency was actually much higher than the other students, but he had been placed in my lower-proficiency class as it was felt that he may feel more comfortable there given his disability, but after one semester it was clear that he needed to be in a higher-proficiency class.
Hearing-impaired students should not automatically be placed in the lower proficiency classes with the notion that such classes will be easier for them to cope with in learning English. In most cases, the hearing-impaired students have a fairly high level of understanding of English, and are ambitious. It is therefore recommended that they do the FEPT (Freshman English Placement Test) reading sections and be placed accordingly within their appropriate proficiency levels.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to help teachers who will be teaching hearing-impaired students for the first time by providing some advice and tips, and to especially alleviate any fears or apprehensions that they may have about teaching them. As already mentioned, teaching hearing-impaired students is challenging but very satisfying at the same time. It is hoped that this project will provide a starting-point for ongoing research and debate on the issue of teaching hearing-impaired students in CELE.

References


