

Improving the Language and Learning of Students Who are Deaf

The saying “Good teaching is good teaching” holds considerable truth when thinking about exemplary practices used in educating students who are deaf. Some adaptations notwithstanding, educating deaf or hearing students well should mean engaging in similar pedagogical practices that link language-learning with content-learning. All students, deaf or hearing, must learn both the language and the content of the courses they take, making all teachers teachers of the language, reading, and writing of their specific subject area. Content, of course, is set according to the dictates of each teacher’s specific discipline, but how might language, reading, and writing be embedded into content in ways that will enable all students — and especially deaf students — to learn from the ideas of others and to put new ideas into their own words? Here are some suggestions:

Language Across the Curriculum

- Before beginning a class, ask students to summarize the ideas discussed in the prior class; then relate the summaries to the goals of the present class.
- Increase the amount of time for students to manipulate ideas through discussion, especially before assigning reading and writing tasks.
- Make ideas come alive, as much as possible, by capitalizing on drama. If, for example, students are studying the catalyst role of enzymes, acting out how these enzymes “grab” amino acids to assemble proteins would be memorable.
- Use blackboard diagrams to illustrate ideas.
- Use analogy to compare known with unknown concepts. As an example, if measurement conversions (inches to centimeters, ounces to grams) are being taught, first use monetary conversions (dollars to dimes, quarters to pennies) so that the idea of changes in form but not amount can be more easily understood.
- List key concepts and vocabulary on the blackboard and refer to them, by pointing, during class.

Reading Across the Curriculum

- Before assigning a reading, give students a brief overview of it.
- If the reading is a narrative, mention character names and roles.
- Model the “marking-up” of text in the form of side-paraphrases and questions.
- Encourage students to engage more with texts by using double-entry journals where quotes or facts from the text are copied in one column of a journal and responses and questions are written on the facing page.
- Visually project as much text as possible through the use of a computer and/or overhead projector. Using your index finger, point out new vocabulary and its linguistic context (the surrounding phrases or clauses). Encourage interpreters to stand or sit as close to the text as possible. Read difficult portions of text aloud, modeling the strategies you use as a reader to make meaning out of it. (Show how meaning builds from prior to present text and how readers predict meaning and keep reading to test predictions.)
- Require students to re-read and re-write assignments that are not satisfactorily completed after the benefit of class discussion.

Writing Across the Curriculum

- Increase the amount of writing required. Think about offering the option of many short pieces as opposed to one or two longer ones.
- Create writing assignments that engage writers, such as response papers, position papers, interviews, and surveys.
- Analyze models of good student writing, showing students exactly what will be expected of their own writing.
- Consider the benefits of requiring multiple drafts of written work and responding to each draft according to its need. Here a FLUENCY, CLARITY, CORRECTNESS approach might be

tried in the following way: Response to Draft 1 would include mentioning if the writing assignment topic was addressed, if enough information was provided, if the information was ordered appropriately and if certain parts were relevant. Point out what language was unclear. Response to Draft 2 (if needed) would continue to ask for more information or a different order of presentation or language clarification. After Draft 3 is completed, the teacher might suggest that it be brought to a writing tutor for grammatical revision and instruction based on the grammatical needs of the student as evident from the piece. Progress made from Draft 1 to Draft 4 might be considered in assigning students a grade.

- Writing tutors need to be fluent in the language of the student and skilled in teaching grammar in a consistent way. An X-Word Grammar approach might be tried. X-Word Grammar is a grammar of written English based on linguistic principles that offers a sequential, cumulative, and rigorous approach to the teaching of English structure. Some thought might be given to instituting this approach program-wide.
- Think about ending each class five minutes earlier and having students write what they learned during that session and what they still have questions about. These writings might be read from at the beginning of the next class (as discussed in the last point under Language Across the Curriculum)

These suggested practices will enable students to become educated language users by strengthening

the connections between new ideas and the understanding and expression of those ideas in language. The more opportunities students are given to “talk,” read, and write about their new learning, the more they will indeed learn.

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