Why Test Accommodations Are Important for Deaf Students

Overview

Test accommodations are changes in testing materials or procedures that reduce barriers to access without changing what is measured by the test. Test accommodations are an important part of ensuring test equity and access for deaf[1] students. Accommodations are unique for each student because each deaf individual has different language, communication, and cultural backgrounds. As many as half of deaf students have additional disabilities that may also affect the test accommodation decisions.[2,3] This summary explains why deaf individuals may need accommodations when taking tests and several options that may reduce access barriers.

Accessible Testing Is Important

Testing is a common practice both in schools and in the workforce. As deaf students are more fully included in a broad array of educational contexts, access to testing experiences is increasingly important. Testing is often high stakes: Most technical schools, community colleges, and universities require admission or placement tests prior to enrollment. Additionally, some careers require a license or certification that includes passing a test.

Deaf Students Have Diverse Language Experiences

Deaf students are a highly diverse population with a broad range of language and cultural backgrounds. English is the language of instruction in most school settings, including testing. These issues become important when thinking about access to testing for deaf students.

- Most deaf people are born to hearing parents, and most of their families do not use sign language. Lack of a shared language between deaf children and their family can lead to delays in development in general.

- Deaf children enter school with a variety of English language abilities such as vocabulary and English syntax. Also, for deaf individuals raised by parents who sign, English may not be their first language.

- Deaf students who have an interpreter often do not have equal access to language in the classroom compared to hearing students. This leads to varied instruction quality and understanding, which results in reduced access to learning. Several factors contribute to these gaps in access, including the following:

  - Teachers might provide insufficient pauses between references to visual information or need additional training in how to best work with interpreters in different classroom settings.

- Interpreters typically cover direct instruction by instructors but do not always capture all the conversation that occurs inside and outside a classroom setting.
- There can be a mismatch in the language preferences between what the student uses and what is provided by the interpreter.

> **Test accommodations play a critical role in test equity for deaf students.**

Tests Are Not Always Accessible

Standardized assessments used to measure academic progress are typically not designed with deaf students in mind. Each of the following factors may make test taking tasks more difficult for deaf students. As a result, deaf test-takers may need more time to process and navigate the assessment tasks.

- Emerging readers may need to reread directions and items to understand the task. Individuals whose primary language is sign language, particularly at school, may have to translate concepts to sign language and back again when working through difficult tasks.
- Tests sometimes contain vocabulary or concepts that are not a part of classroom instruction. Deaf students do not always have equal access to the kind of "world knowledge" that students draw upon to understand the context of test items.
- Test items often use language in ways that are different from what students experience in home and school environments. For example, test response options such as multiple choice, select all that apply, and true or false statements are specific to testing. Like all students, deaf students may need practice and familiarity with the specific language structures used in many testing formats.

Test Accommodations Reduce Barriers

Accommodations are an important consideration for assessment because tests may not be designed in a way that deaf individuals can show their knowledge and skills. Federal laws[4] require public schools and employers to provide reasonable accommodations. Test accommodations are designed to reduce barriers for tests that may not accurately measure the deaf individual's knowledge and skills. For example, in a test that includes voiced instructions, deaf individuals may be provided captioned instructions, sign language interpretation, as well as extra time for reading and understanding the text.

- Tailor accommodations based on students needs and preferences. Accommodations for testing should be similar to accommodations used during classroom instruction. Students also need to practice with assessment accommodations prior to test day.
- Ensure that requested accommodations do not interfere with what is being measured. Accommodations that are allowed in one section of a test may not be allowed in another.
- Educate and empower deaf individuals to understand and explain their accommodation needs. Provide opportunities for deaf test-takers to show how they understand test content (with and without accommodations) to better provide evidence for accommodations decisions.
- Hire and train professional interpreters who have experience working with education, testing, and the specific content area.

Examples of Test Accommodations for Deaf Students

Assistive listening devices allow the listener to tune directly into a speaker's voice (e.g., hearing aid, cochlear implant, FM system). This is particularly important for any directions provided orally.

Captioned media provides text representation of audio content on videos, audio recordings, and more. This is important for items where students need to use information from that media content.

Extended time is an accommodation for tests that normally have time limits. Extended time is a common approach for students who need it to read test items, watch sign language videos, or use other accommodations that are provided.

Glossaries or dictionaries provide support in understanding the meaning of words in test items. A dictionary provides general definitions of words, and a glossary provides definitions and examples with context for the test. For some deaf students, using a glossary or dictionary may be helpful in understanding English words or phrases that are not related to what is being measured (e.g., it would not be appropriate to use a dictionary or glossary when testing English vocabulary).

Individual administration allows students to take a test in a different environment than other students. This accommodation can reduce distractions, allows students to go at their own pace, and may be useful when students need to take breaks or other scheduling-related accommodations.

Frequent breaks can include stopping between sections or providing longer breaks between test administrations. Because test taking can be tiring for many students, but especially taxing for students taking a test over a longer period of time, in an emerging language, or via visual modalities, frequent breaks can help provide rest needed to combat fatigue.

Sign language interpreters can translate part or all of the test into sign language, most typically American Sign Language (ASL) in the United States. Many translations of standardized assessments are delivered as videos embedded in the online delivery format. Providing an ASL translation may allow ASL users to more fully demonstrate what they know. The goal of a sign language translation is to keep the meaning of test questions while also following the language rules of ASL. Translations should not lead or cue students to a particular response or give an unfair advantage or disadvantage to either English versions or ASL versions.

Scribes record or write responses to test questions for students who may speak or sign their answers. For example, this accommodation might be needed when a student has mobility issues and speech-to-text software is not an appropriate fit.

Recommended Resources

- U.S. Department of Justice: "ADA Requirements: Test Accommodations"
  tinyurl.com/testingADA

- Measured Progress Innovation Lab & Maryland State Department of Education: "Guidelines for the Development of American Sign Language Versions of Academic Test Content for K-12 Students"
  tinyurl.com/gaapasl

- National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes (NDC) E-Learning Series: Test Equity
  nationaldeafcenter.org/learn

- NDC: "Test Accessibility: What Professionals Need to Know"
  nationaldeafcenter.org/testaccess

- NDC: "Student Planning Guide: Testing and Accommodations"
  nationaldeafcenter.org/testplanning

- National Center on Educational Outcomes: "Accessibility & Accommodations for General Assessments"
  tinyurl.com/NCEOaccess

Notes and References

[1] NDC uses the term *deaf* in an all-inclusive manner to include people who identify as deaf, deafblind, deafdisabled, hard of hearing, late-deafened, and hearing impaired. NDC recognizes that for many individuals, identity is fluid and can change over time or with setting. NDC has chosen to use one term, *deaf*, with the goal of recognizing the shared experiences of individuals from diverse deaf communities while also honoring their differences.

[2] Gallaudet Research Institute. (2011). *Regional and national summary report of data from 2010-12 annual survey of deaf and hard of hearing children and youth*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University. Retrieved from **https://research.gallaudet.edu/Demographics/2012_National_Summary.pdf**

[3] Garberoglio, C. L., Palmer, J., Cawthon, S. W., & Sales, A. (2019). *Deaf people and educational attainment in the United States: 2019*. Washington, DC: Office of Special Education Programs, National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes.

[4] Laws that protect children and adults with disabilities from exclusion, discrimination, and unequal treatment include, but are not limited to: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Read more: **www.nationaldeafcenter.org/lawsummary**

- Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-336, 104 Stat. 328 (1990)

- ADA Amendments Act of 2008 (Public Law 110-325, ADAAA)

- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Pub. L. No. 93-112, 87 Stat. 394 (1973)

- Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004)

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