

# Learning Principles

## Working with deaf learners

From the moment a deaf person contacts your learning centre, communication issues will be raised. The most obvious will relate to the learner's first or preferred language.

This could be sign language, such as British Sign Language (BSL) or speech, possibly with the help of specialist equipment such as hearing aids.

Does the learner use a language service professional, such as an interpreter or lipspeaker, when communicating with hearing people?

Once the preference has been identified, all effort should be made to have the appropriate support in place before the learner attends the first interview or class.

You may also wish to consider what modifications could be made within the centre to allow the deaf student to participate fully in the learning experience, and to make that experience as enjoyable as possible. Such modifications are often simply achieved.

BSL has its own grammar, structure and syntax, and this may be reflected in the learner's literacy level. English may be his or her second language and, although the concepts that the learner meets in the learning centre may be familiar, the vocabulary being used can be new. Learners often benefit from the language in some course materials being modified.

Similarly, some assessments contain an oral component, which may be inappropriate for some learners to deliver using their own speech. In that case, it may be possible to modify the assessments to allow delivery via an interpreter.

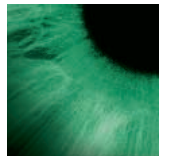
Ideally, centres should ensure that all modifications are approved by the relevant awarding bodies and are in place before courses begin.

### Classroom modifications

Tutors may wish to discuss with deaf learners any further modifications that could benefit them. Examples could include:

- Ensuring that the classroom lighting is sufficient. If the room has to be darkened during an overhead or PowerPoint presentation, then arrange sufficient lighting to allow the learner to see the tutor and a lipspeaker or interpreter if present.
- Some backgrounds can be distracting to a deaf learner who is trying to concentrate on the tutor or interpreter. Two that are easily remedied are human people passing an open door or window and animated screensavers on a PC.
- Problems may also arise because of the acoustics of a room, open windows and doors, tiled floors, metal or concrete surfaces can all create distracting noises or echo. Eliminating these as much as possible would also benefit a lipspeaker or interpreter.
- Many deaf learners prefer to sit at the front of the class, where they can make best use of any residual hearing and more easily lipread the tutor. It is often the best position for them to see the tutor, lipspeaker/interpreter and any visual aids. Whenever possible, visual aids should be of a type that allows for being viewed in this manner.

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- If a group discussion is required, deaf learners will often benefit from a seating arrangement that allows them to see and lipread others in the group when they are speaking. This could be a circular or semi-circular arrangement and may include a seating space for the language service professional.
- If the learner relies on lipreading, the tutor should be aware that speaking with their back to the student, eg, while writing on the board, makes lipreading impossible. Similarly, delivering a lesson while constantly moving around the room, bending or shouting also make the task more difficult.
- Giving the learner and language service professional notes in advance is often of great benefit. It allows them both to become familiar with any new terminology and to devise a range of agreed signs. Whenever video material is to be shown as part of the course, it is also helpful to allow both parties to see it in advance, for the same reason.
- Above all, make every attempt to involve the learner fully in the learning experience. A few adjustments may be needed, but they allow the person to contribute to the lesson.

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## Language service professionals

All language service professionals have undergone intensive training in their particular field and follow the codes of practice and ethics of their professional associations. In a learning environment, they should be as unobtrusive as possible, allowing teaching staff to deliver classes as usual. They are not responsible for the learner's timekeeping, attendance or behaviour, but are simply a conduit for information between the teaching staff and the learner.

The language service professional that a learner uses often depends on their language choice - sign language or written/spoken English. Listed below are those most commonly used in the classroom:

### Sign language interpreter

The most common sign language in the UK is British Sign Language (BSL), which has its own grammar, structure and syntax, which are different from those used in English. There is also signed supported English (SSE), which uses signs borrowed from BSL, but is delivered in an order similar to spoken English. A learner who uses sign language may choose to have an interpreter present during classes, labs or placements. Interpreters often work using a time lag, so when asking the learner questions, please allow time for them to be asked fully. Details of local interpreters can be obtained from organisations such as the Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People (CACDP) or The Scottish Association of Sign Language Interpreters (SASLI), which maintain registers of such professionals (website details are at the end of this paper).

### Lipspeaker

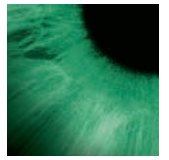
Deaf people whose first language is spoken English may prefer to use a lipspeaker in a classroom. The job of the lipspeaker is to clearly enunciate the content of what is being delivered by the tutor, but without using their voice. Again, CACDP and SASLI maintain registers of lipspeakers.

### Notetakers

In class, it is impossible for a deaf learner to watch the interpreter or lipspeaker and simultaneously take notes, so many also use the services of a notetaker. When it is important for the learner to view these notes in real time, they should be recorded electronically, by having the notetaker type the information into a laptop. The learner can then see this on their own laptop via an appropriate connection. For information on notetakers in your area, contact the RNID or a local deaf organisation such as Deaf Action or Deaf Connections.

### Extended learning support

Many colleges have suitably qualified teaching staff, who can give additional support to deaf learners. It may be possible for learners from your centre to be referred to such support if needed.



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## Technical aids to communication

There are a number of technical aids that can be used by a deaf learner, whatever their language preference. As with all technology, the rate of evolution is such that functionality should be considered, rather than the actual appliance. Full information on available equipment can be obtained by contacting the RNID.

### Safety

Centres should liaise with their health and safety officer about appropriate measures to ensure the well-being of all learners. These could include the installation of flashing alarms to alert the learner about evacuations, etc. There are also vibrating pagers, which learners can carry with them at all times within the centre. These have a small screen, and can be used to display security announcements and text messages, as well as alerting the student to alarms and evacuations.

### Listening equipment

For learners who use residual hearing, listening aids allow them to more clearly discern what is being said by the tutor. They often have associated problems and there are a number of simple measures that can be taken to optimise their performance, such as closing doors and windows to reduce background noise and ensuring that one person speaks at a time. The appliances may also be prone to electronic interference from sources such as computers and fluorescent lighting, and if such problems do arise the learner should inform staff. Where possible, they should be integrated into multimedia or audio-visual equipment used in the class. Once again, information on available equipment can be obtained from the RNID.

### Telecommunications

There is a variety of options for deaf learners who want to contact, or be contacted by, learning centre staff. Some learners use telephones fitted with amplification devices. Others may prefer textphones, which use a small screen to display typed messages in real time. Centres that do not have a textphone can contact, or be contacted by a learner via a service called Typetalk, also known as the national telephone relay service. An operator will type the hearing caller's words for the deaf caller to read and the typed reply is then spoken back to the hearing caller. However, the most logical and simple methods available are mobile phone text messages, fax and email.

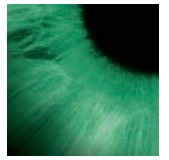
## Legislation

In previous years, there were instances of suitably qualified deaf people submitting applications to educational centres, only to be told that acceptance on their courses were subject to access to an appropriate level of communication support. However, under the Special Education Needs and Disability Act 2001 (SENDA), a deaf learner cannot be refused admission to a course based solely on the grounds of their disability. A learner's admission to his or her desired course should only be determined on the grounds of their qualifications, skills and potential, regardless of the level of support needed.

Learning centres also have an obligation to make "reasonable adjustments" to course materials and assessments to allow fair and full access for deaf learners. Adjustments should allow the learners to clearly demonstrate their understanding of course material in a manner that is consistent with the awarding bodies' regulations, and which can be verified by an independent third party if required. The appropriate awarding body must approve all modifications and adjustments that are made or proposed. Centres are also expected to anticipate the needs of deaf and disabled learners in order to make their service provision more accessible.

## Modifying the language of course materials

Although reducing the complexity of the language used in course materials can benefit all learners, centres should first review the necessity of such modifications. If an understanding of the language and vocabulary are



an integral part of the course, then no modification may be required or permitted. Anyone involved in language modification should consider the following guidelines:

- avoid the use of idioms and metaphors wherever possible, as they have no direct equivalent in sign language and are often confusing and distracting for the deaf learner
- avoid the use of ambiguous words or phrases
- if possible, use simpler and shorter equivalent wording, eg, the word "use" instead of "utilise", etc
- make use of suitable diagrams
- use clear headings, indicating the subject matter to follow
- the language and vocabulary in course materials should be consistent with that used in course assessments.

The arrival of a deaf learner in a centre should not be looked upon as an inconvenience, but as an opportunity to review and improve your teaching practice

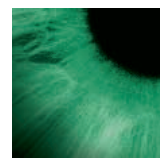
## Modifying the assessment

Each learner is unique and any adjustments should recognise this. Centres should make accurate assessments of each learner's needs and these should accompany details of proposed adjustments when applying for awarding body approval. However, if learners are still unable to demonstrate the required skills after modification, this raises a question about whether it is a suitable course for that particular learner.

Adjustments to assessments could include:

- allowing extra reading time to make sure that the learner understands the vocabulary and what they have to do
- having the assessment paper signed by a sign language interpreter
- providing modified assessment papers, written in plain English
- having oral assessments replaced by written papers
- having aural assessments delivered by a lipspeaker
- allowing the learner to use alternative formats such as sign language, which is video taped for marking or verification by third parties
- allowing the learner to provide short written answers to questions. These can be clarified or expanded on using sign language and again can be video taped for marking or verification
- providing a private room to facilitate the above without disturbing others.

The arrival of a deaf learner in a centre should not be looked upon as an inconvenience, but as an opportunity to review and improve your teaching practice. Using plain English and relevant visual aids in course materials and delivering at a measured pace, will ultimately benefit all learners.



## More information

For further details of all learning support resources, visit [www.brite.ac.uk/resources/deaf](http://www.brite.ac.uk/resources/deaf)

The following websites also provide useful information:

[www.typpetalk.org](http://www.typpetalk.org)

[www.rnid.org.uk](http://www.rnid.org.uk)

[www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk)

[www.batod.org.uk](http://www.batod.org.uk)

[www.nated.org](http://www.nated.org)

[www.cacdp.org.uk](http://www.cacdp.org.uk)

[www.sasli.org.uk](http://www.sasli.org.uk)

[www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2001/20010010.htm](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2001/20010010.htm)

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Deaf Perspective

This paper is part of the Learning Principles series, which aims to provide accessible and practical information for staff in learndirect scotland branded learning centres.

Each document highlights best practice to help people to learn and stay learning.

The series covers a range of themes including sensory impairment, learning difficulties, brain sciences and working with deaf learners.

Learning Principles papers are available in pdf and plain text formats at:

[www.lds4partners.com](http://www.lds4partners.com)

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