Advancing ALTELLA Kickoff
Question and Answer Session on
Multilingual Learners who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing

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1. Tell me a little about yourself and your expertise.

I am a faculty member at University of Texas at Austin, with a primary appointment educational psychology and a courtesy appointment in special education. My background is in language development, particularly within the context of assessment and equity in assessment, and I've been doing that research and related work for deaf students and English learners for about 20 years. And when I say deaf, I mean the *umbrella* of deaf, hard of hearing, late deaf, and traumatic brain injury deaf. I often use *deaf* in an inclusive manner, which refers to a broad range of different identities and experiences. The National Deaf Center (NDC) uses this definition: "The National Deaf Center is using the term *deaf* in an all-inclusive manner, to include people who may 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 experiences that are shared by all members of our diverse communities while also honoring all of our differences."

I work with assessment and access issues for students with a range of disabilities, but primarily those two groups. My lens is looking at not only the requirements of what standardized assessment is trying to do, which is to have a valid measure that you can make inferences about across students, but also to think about how the design of assessment, how the administration of assessment, and how the interpretation of those scores are each critical points in a valid and accessible assessment framework, and always thinking about those things with the lens of diversity language, specifically deafness. I'm also the Director of the National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes, so our relationship with assessment is very much one of testing as a gate keeper. We spend a lot of time thinking about what it means to have a high stakes test, who's involved in the decision making around them, and the experience of testing itself for the kids.

2. What does listening look like for multilingual learners who are deaf/hard of hearing? How does it mesh or not with language acquisition definitions and practices?

I want to step back a little bit from this question and talk about the deaf population because the extent to which they apply as language learners is different than most. Also, the extent to which they have additional disabilities, specifically those that are cognitive in nature, is also somewhat uniquely tied to the experience of being a deaf person growing up, depending on the context. One thing to know is that the estimate of additional disabilities with the deaf population is about 50%, so it is significantly higher than some of the other disability populations. When you're in a school system and you are determining eligibility for an intervention, you need to flag for primary disability. That has a pretty significant relationship with whether or not the education system is looking at deafness or looking at any sort of learning disability or cognitive impairment, however that looks. With this specific sub-population (i.e., deaf and significant cognitive disabilities), I don't know where those trends are in terms of which one is getting flagged first, whether it is the deaf getting primary support or the significant cognitive disability getting primary support. Because traditionally when we are looking at additional disability within the deaf population, we are assuming deaf first for service eligibility purposes. I'm not sure that that holds true in this particular subset. It's also very difficult to have valid and reliable measurement and diagnosis of additional disability for some deaf students. Sometimes you're guessing, and it's often much later. So, people focus on the deafness for a long time and then kids get further in school and you're like, "There's something else going on here. We thought it was just the deafness, but there's something cognitive going on that we really weren't paying attention to because we were focusing on things related to hearing loss." Just knowing that you may have a sort of a delayed phase in terms of seeing more kids show up in middle school with a new identification for some kinds of significant cognitive disabilities than you thought you would. So that's a fairly complex and nuanced conversation about what is the relationship between deafness and additional disabilities, specifically significant cognitive disabilities.

The second thing I want to really emphasize is the impact of language deprivation on cognitive development. That's been something that is really, from equal rights to language standpoint, very important but also from a perspective of understanding the cumulative impact of not having access to language in the home. So, you think about only about 5–10 percent of deaf kids are born to hearing parents. There's a growing awareness that some of the academic delays or academic challenges are tied back to what is language deprivation in early childhood, but then being manifested as a cognitive disability later. So really, it's not just the fact that there's an overlap and hard to diagnose in that sort of gray area of early elementary and elementary, but there's a sense if you go back to the early childhood component, we're learning more and more about the long term effects of some of those home language access issues, which squarely fits within the English language learner or language learner conversation. There may be multiple reasons why a deaf student might be considered a language learner. When you're thinking about multilingual learners, we have a lot of kids who are still considered first language learners when they get to school: American Sign Language or English. When you're

looking at entry at school, you may have a pretty significant percentage who haven't had access to language in the first place, and it shows up when they come to school. So, in addition to multi-lingual learners there's also the question of "Have they had a chance to learn language?" That's an important question, and the discussion around language deprivation is really focused around that.

There is certainly, as with the entire U.S. population, a diversification of home language of those kids who are deaf coming from any family, whether that is deaf or hearing. The language acquisition pattern can be just like if home language is English/home language is not English—the language deprivation may be the more important thing. It doesn't matter what your home language is because you're not getting access to Spanish or English. It doesn't matter because it's an auditory communication thing. First language is so often not intact. So when you look at a lot of theories about first language to second language acquisition and the idea that you build upon first language, there a lot of concerns that the first language is not actually intact, and people do not know it. That is what I would say is the number one issue in my mind when you are looking at traditional language acquisition theories and second language acquisition theories—you usually depend on a first language, and that is often not true because of the disability and fit within the family access context that is not there for deaf kids.

3. How do we separate out the skills of listening that are not tied to the physiology of hearing? How would we differentiate between listening and hearing? How would we capture the subskills under "listening"?

From a very practical standpoint, there is no difference between listening and hearing. You have auditory access, and it goes to your brain. For some deaf and hard of hearing kids, that can be redirected, changed, augmented with assistive listening aids, hearing aids, cochlear implants, additional visual information, or lip reading. There is a lot that goes into the act of listening or hearing, and it often takes more energy to put those pieces together. I'll use myself as an example; if I'm on a phone call without any visual or I'm in a Zoom call with video, the phone call's going to be much harder. I still hear most of the things I need to hear on a phone call if the auditory headphones and hearing aids are on, and on high. It is the exhaustion level because my brain is working that much harder to try and guess and fill in without the visual input and chance to lipread, put information together across modalities. I always get to the end with most of what I need to know (I think!), but that's probably because I have a lot of experience guessing and getting to the end, experience over time and knowing when I am likely missing something and need to ask for additional information. I also know what to fix, for example if something did not sound right. I have a meta-cognitive skill set that young kids probably don't have yet; I know what I'm missing when I'm missing something.

So, what is listening? Well, listening is both the hearing and the awareness of the hearing and knowing when to say, "I'm not sure I got that whole sentence" or "that word doesn't fit with what that sentence is supposed to be." I can now ask for clarification and repair. So, it is the

meta-cognitive piece that is also part of listening that is not just hearing. That's one thing to think about.

The last thing is the idea of *in the air* communication. Are you now talking about what you do with your ears? Or are you talking about how you're receiving language? The receptive linguistic capacity can be done through the eyes, and for many sign language users, *in the air* and *listening* is the receptive capacity of *seeing* language. We are using both our eyes and our ears to listen. Not to *hear,* but to *listen*. We are putting information together, and we're inferring meaning. I mean, you can read my face and know if I am being sarcastic or not, right? That's part of listening—getting information. That can be done with sign language. So, it's one of the things where I always ask, "are you talking about *receptive language* or are you talking about hearing and listening?"

So, how do you separate the skills of listening that are not tied to the physiology of hearing? I would think about how do you know when to repair? How do you make inferences about meaning? It's what your brain is doing when you're done transmitting that information, augmented or not. I hope that's somewhat clear.

4. How do we meaningfully assess students who are deaf/hard of hearing in the listening domain of an English language proficiency assessment?

That is the million-dollar question. I think you decide whether or not you mean receptive language versus actually *sound in the air*. So, if a reading test becomes a receptive modality, that's got other pros and cons to it. Reading is not the same as listening, but are you assuming that no deaf/hard of hearing students have access to sound or visual input of English? I think it would be a strong statement to say that no deaf/hard of hearing student could take a listening test or could take a phonology test. I think there would be a huge push back in the field of assessment of English language proficiency people in deaf education to say that none of these students have any access. So, where is that line? I think it's going to be case by case. I think that's part of the problem—you can't have a blanket answer to that question.

You have to decide if an American Sign Language listening test is a linguistic receptive test that does what it needs to do. My guess is much of the English language proficiency test would say no. If you're trying to measure all of the domains of English language proficiency, often you would have to throw listening out. So, the answer to that question would be maybe you can't, but that doesn't mean you can't measure English language proficiency—you just can't measure listening. So, you might have to let go of that in lieu of getting an overall score in other ways.

5. What are the common failures/assumptions people make with regard to developing assessments for multilingual learners who are deaf/hard of hearing? What do people get wrong?

I'll just say again that assuming that a first language is intact—that's something they probably get wrong. That may be more of an instructional issue than a testing issue, but I think they're related. I think the assumption that there's no visual input used is an assumption that lacks nuance. Listening is using visual cues. If you really mean listening, you need to turn off the camera to qualify as only using auditory input. And I'm not sure that's necessary. You know listening to an audio file versus watching and listening to a video file are both listening, and some folks only think of it as listening to an audio file. That's got some issues with it.

There are also some pretty annoying biases in the types of scenarios that sometimes get presented, such as "I want to be a musician when I grow up." Did you have to? Can you pick a scenario that isn't sound based? Even if the English language proficiency is what you're getting at. The experiences are not relatable for deaf students; we still see a lot of that. You look at test items that refer to music or that refer to sound based things even though that's not the test item construct. I think people sometimes don't realize what a different level of experience it means to be deaf when you don't have the same access to sound and associated experiences. You also don't have access to the same incidental learning, world knowledge, inferences about how people behave, why people behave—those are different when you're living in a deaf world. For example, why somebody might not respond. Is it because they are being rude or because they didn't hear you? If you set up a scenario that's talking about making inferences about behavior that are based on a hearing experience, that may not apply and may actually lead you to a very different place if you're thinking about it from a deaf lens. Another example is scenarios or test items that emphasize communication between a parent, child, or peers. You're assuming that is accessible for a deaf child, and often it is not. So, it is really making references to a social context that doesn't apply equally to all people, and I think often test item writers miss that. That's the hard thing for people. They might get the construct part right, but they miss the entire construct irrelevant piece. Also, another thing they get wrong is that they think that they know what the bias is without asking. Always have a deaf person review it. Don't assume that you can just send the ones that you notice and be done. The ones that you notice probably are not the ones that are a subtle problem.

6. What are some other things that you think maybe we should be considering as we're thinking about a unique screener for this population of kids?

Back in the early days of when I first started looking at accommodations research, the teachers told me that more often than not, they were trying to refer to them an alternate assessment instead of an accommodation because they knew the accommodation wasn't accommodating, that standard test wasn't going to capture what the kids knew as much as the alternate assessment would. I don't know how you get into that fund of knowledge now, but there's a sense of that there's some kids for whom even the format and practice of the test taking skills

that are needed to participate in a standardized assessment are not a great match of where they're at and an alternate assessment may be a better fit. I'm thinking about the kids who might get diagnosed later. So, you know that they're deaf, you know that they're multilingual. They may do better with an alternate screener than a regular screener. Who are those kids and how do you offer that option? That takes a coordinated system, right? It takes a decision-making process that looks at these kids and goes, "Hmmm, I wonder if that might be worth administrating both. I don't know." Again, that's a practice and policy problem. I saw a lot of teachers say this, not because they were trying to cheat, not because they were trying to get their kids the easier test. It's because they realized an accommodated test wasn't going to do it. And part of that has to do with the test item structures and with the way you interface the test with the number of options. There was a lot of ways those test items are constructed linguistically that are very difficult for deaf students. And so, the extent to which an alternate assessment doesn't do that, I would pay attention to those things too for a screener.

7. Can you give an example of a way that an item might be constructed linguistically that's hard for a deaf student?

English grammar. Especially if you're using American Sign Language in your learning environment and general communication, the grammar is so different. Sometimes it's an issue with the clarity of the task. Items where the kid is supposed to pick all that apply versus pick the one that fits best, it is more vague than concrete. These are mostly academic assessments that I'm thinking of instead of English proficiency, which is different. Certainly, if word knowledge is going to depend on words that you learn at home, and not that you learn at school, that's the one that makes me a little nervous in terms of language deprivation. People may not be aware that the language deprivation is there.

We often see an assessment where there are some confusing elements in the directions because things are set up in a linear way due to our English structure—relationships between ideas and concepts can be hard to understand. You may think they're clear in English, but they may need expansion and clarification to a non-native user, particularly with such a different linguistic experience. That's an accommodation in itself that's not available unless you have a live test administrator. That's not specific to an alternate assessment, but I feel like the alternate assessment has more room for a personal aide, teacher, test administrator, or somebody individually administrating it as opposed to administration by group. Without someone there to clarify what the direction means, that kid often benefits from expansion. To bring the attention back to what the goal is, that structure follows American Sign Language. We set up a space, we set up the intention, and then we tell you about the people there, and then there is the rest of the story. English is linear, and so when you read directions in a linear way, it's structured very differently than a kid who's thinking in an American Sign Language way, which is set up in the organization. It gets confusing, so often it is helpful when someone translates the directions and is there to sort of help expand and go, "No, you remember this? It's over here."

8. What kind of accommodations do you think would be most appropriate for students who are deaf/hard of hearing?

I think the accommodations are most appropriate for students who are deaf/hard of hearing are aligned with what they get in instruction—the ones that help them learn are the ones that help them take a test. That's going to vary by student. They are not always the ones that are on policy and on paper, but the ones that are aligned with instruction are the ones that are the most appropriate. For domains that appear to be less successful, how do we maintain the contribution to the assessment? I would say I'm not sure if we're going to get there 100%. And that goes to the inference of what you do with the scores. Or do you have multiple sources of information when you're making inferences about what a student's proficiency level is? You may have that performance on that assessment, which depending on the accessibility, format, and accommodations, may get you a test score. What other information can you bring to the table so that you have multiple sources and information before you make an inference about what a student's proficiency needs are, English language service needs, etc. So really, it's about what you do with the test scores that would be my main focus, and how do you triangulate everything that you have.

9. What advice would you have for teachers to help students advocate for themselves?

I have many resources I can send you, and some of them are fun. We at the National Deaf Center have a game called Deafverse, which teaches kids to advocate for themselves. It has a curriculum with it. Over and over again, we talk about role models, peer groups, autonomy development early on, the opportunity to make decisions and mistakes and then fix them. It's something that everybody needs, but deaf students and students with disabilities in general are often taken care of in the helping. The over helping isn't really going in the same direction as self-advocacy. So, we have a number of specific strategies and tricks. Most of them focus on knowing yourself, understanding what your needs are, and understanding what your rights are. Some work with self-determination as a construct, and that is sort of a main thing in the field right now.

And finally practice—practice making mistakes and ways to learn from them and talk about them. Usually, that's with somebody who knows how to navigate the hearing world. There are some things that need to be made explicit that maybe are not explicit. I see this all the time with deaf students. It's not unique to deaf students, but it seems to happen often—that there's this sense of anxiety knowing there's missing information and not knowing what it is, and I know I'm going make a misstep because I'm walking to this unknown. So, it's about helping students advocate first for making sure they get the information that they need, so that they're not just guessing. So, we call it information deprivation. We've got language deprivation, and we also have information deprivation. We talk about how to, in our political context and the COVID context, make those things accessible so that the general population, including deaf people, know what is happening. This kind of a basic thing—that it is not just tied to education and assessment. It is certainly tied to how you help students advocate for themselves, but it's

just making sure that you do your part as well. And not asking the students to always be the ones having to fight for everything because that's a lot of work. This access is a shared thing, not only just the person who has to ask for it because that becomes a pretty undue burden pretty quickly.

10. Any other comments or thoughts that were not covered?

I've been back and forth with a lot of conversations about phonological awareness and whether or not deaf people can have phonological awareness if they do not have access to sound. I think that's an ongoing debate in the field. There are some programs for deaf students that specifically teach phonological awareness in ways that address some of those issues, but I've also seen deaf peers who are brilliant, highly educated, all the things. We did a phonological awareness test on them and they were like, "I have no idea what you're talking about." So, I think that's a mixed one. I don't think you are going to get a clear answer one side of the fence or the other on that whether or not you want to. Is it necessary for reading? Maybe not. My qualifying exam for my dissertation in 1998 was on that topic of whether or not phonological awareness is necessary to be a reader, and you still see those conversations happening. So, if you can't capture phonological awareness, does that mean you are not proficient in English? Maybe you're not proficient in phonological awareness, but that's as far as you can go with that statement.

Other Helpful Resources

WHAT DOES DEAF MEAN (video). I often use *deaf* in an inclusive manner, which refers to a broad range of different identities and experiences. The National Deaf Center uses this definition: "The National Deaf Center is using the term *deaf* in an all-inclusive manner, to include people who may identify as deaf, deafblind, deafdisabled, hard of hearing, late-deafened, and hearing impaired. The National Deaf Center recognizes that for many individuals, identity is fluid and can change over time or with setting. The National Deaf Center has chosen to use one term, deaf, with the goal of recognizing experiences that are shared by all members of our diverse communities while also honoring all of our differences."

BACK TO SCHOOL GUIDES (website). Good summary of all things related to access and education for deaf students, with a focus on COVID context. We have three guides: One for educators and professionals in high schools, one for educators and professional in colleges, and one for youth and families (that is also translated into Spanish and American Sign Language). There are a lot of valuable, user-friendly tips and strategies on how to support deaf students particularly in this online COVID context (and FACE MASKS!). The entire COVID resources webpage has the full set of what we have developed in the last 8 months.

RESOURCES RELATED TO TESTING (website). This is our group of resources related to testing and access for deaf students. Deaf Students and English Learner Services and Testing Deaf Students with Additional Disabilities may be of particular relevance.

HOW TO SUPPORT SELF ADVOCACY (website). This is Deafverse, our online game + curriculum that supports students in their development of self-advocacy skills.

NEED HELP? Go to the National Deaf Center's fabulous HELP team, ready for your questions.

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