Meeting Mandates, Supporting New Students, and Improving a Good Program

By Candi Mascia-Reed

After a period of relative quiet in the 20 years that followed the initiation of the Individualized Education Program (IEP), teachers in the Hackensack Total Communication Program in Hackensack, New Jersey, suddenly faced a multitude of new federal, state, and district procedures. At the same time, the population of deaf and hard of hearing students that entered our program from other countries increased significantly. This was a lot to face, but we were determined to keep our expectations high. Here’s how we did it.

In recent years, the Hispanic student population in the Bergen County Special Services School District increased dramatically. During the 2013-2014 school year alone, the number of students not born in the United States or from families where English was not spoken in the home more than doubled, increasing from 23 to 54. Most of these students came from Spanish-speaking families. Today they comprise 54 percent of our 63-student program.

At the same time, teachers faced different evaluation measures, including the use of the Common Core State Standards, especially in the language arts classrooms, and the need to document student progress and systematically analyze student data. Furthermore, teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students were required to address and implement an additional array of administrative measures, including formative assessments and monitoring of student growth objectives—what many programs call student learning outcomes. All the while, teachers confronted the increased use of and need to understand on-line resources.

This happened as students from other countries arrived with an urgent need for direct and
concentrated attention and services. The learning gap between these students and the students who were already part of our program was enormous. The newly arriving deaf and hard of hearing students had never experienced early intervention, interpreters, technology, or any services routinely provided to deaf and hard of hearing children in the United States. Few had any fluency in reading or writing; many arrived without any recognized language at all, spoken or signed. Further, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, routinely provided to hearing students, were neither appropriate nor accessible for deaf and hard of hearing students.

This meant that the Hackensack Programs for the Deaf—a county-wide program providing a wide range of educational services for deaf and hard of hearing students—faced another enormous challenge. How would we meet all of these new mandates and address the stunning changes in demographics and the needs of our newly arriving students?

Our program consists of the Union Street School, where students from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade are provided services from small group instruction to fully mainstream instruction with interpreters, and Hackensack High School, where students are provided options from fully mainstreamed placements with hearing students, interpreters, and resource support to self-contained classrooms. We began with a series of professional learning community meetings; these meetings began in 2012 and continued in 2013 and 2014 as teachers, interpreters, speech teachers, and supportive personnel figured out ways of making our approach more systematic and cohesive. The issues facing our program were clear:

- Students entered our program at every level; setting up a single ESL class for deaf and hard of hearing students was not realistic.
While our program had hearing and deaf staff who were fluent in Spanish, no teachers of the deaf were fluent in Spanish and no interpreters were fluent in the variety of country-specific sign language systems that our new students might use.

Whatever we set up for our students would have to fit into our school culture with its values and beliefs, curriculum, classroom instructional strategies, course offerings, assessment strategies, staff professional development, and collaborative activities with families.

**Language Lab: A Force that Became with Us**

As a result of these meetings, we changed the format of our Language Lab, originally simply a pull-out instructional time for those who needed it. Now all of our students—whether mainstreamed in academic classes, in non-academic mainstreamed classes, or in small group classes taught by teachers of the deaf—would be scheduled for Language Lab. In Language Lab, a teacher of the deaf, a speech teacher, and a sign language interpreter would use a specific program of study to enable our students—those who were newly arrived in this country and those who had grown up here—to improve literacy skills.

Working together under the direction of a teacher of the deaf, the speech teacher and the sign language interpreter would help students develop and refine their knowledge of English. We would base our teaching on three guides:

- The Common Core State Standards in English and Language Arts
- The World-Class Instructional Design and Assignment (WIDA)—Standards developed through state collaboration and a grant from the U.S. Department of Education through the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.
- The Fry word list—A compilation, developed in the 1990s, of the most frequently occurring words in printed English

We would not have a curriculum but instead incorporate selected concepts and overarching philosophies from WIDA and the Common Core—and use those to educate our deaf and hard of hearing learners. With an assist from the Fry word list, our interpreters and speech teachers would work together to build the reading skills of our deaf and hard of hearing students. This structure was implemented in 2014 in response to discussions in the Professional Learning Communities, where everyone realized that such collaboration was necessary. Interpreters, who could visually present multiple meanings of vocabulary, collaborating with speech teachers would most successfully foster language development when they worked together with students.

**Building English Vocabulary: Reading, Writing, and Signed Discourse**

In the fall of 2014, our speech teachers and interpreters began working with deaf and hard of hearing students in the Language Lab. They focused on the Fry word list, tackling the most frequently used words and combinations of words in English print. Attention focused on the word, phrase, and sentence levels, and students read materials and completed accompanying assessment pieces.

Each Fry level is taught and assessed sequentially with the goal of increasing fluency. To increase understanding beyond the one-word recognition level, these frequently used words are underlined and put into short, three-word phrases. Students select several phrases and write complete sentences. Students are administered pre- and post-assessments beginning with the first 100 words.

Speech teachers, in the role of English language specialists, and interpreters, in the role of sign language specialists, team with small groups of students for these activities. The speech teachers function as English language experts, while the interpreters provide sign language models. Together they explore words, phrases, and extended printed text of English discourse. They provide synonyms and antonyms for words and discuss multiple meanings of words in both English and sign language. Speech teachers provide instruction in reading,
writing, and word usage in the English language; interpreters help with translations to sign. For example, English is famous for its homonyms, i.e., words that sound and are even spelled exactly the same but have different meanings. The English word “run,” for example, has many different sign translations, and students discuss different concepts implicit in phrases such as to run for president, to run the water to do laundry, or to fix a run in one’s stockings.

In another example, both the speech teacher and the sign interpreter may work with students in fleshing out the multiple meanings of “park.” One can park a car, and one can take a walk in a park. Flash cards are laminated for students to take home or use with each other.

**And the Work Continues: Perfecting Language Lab**

Today teachers have refocused instruction to:

- negotiate reading text complexity
- provide opportunities for more independent reading of texts
- ask more text-dependent questions
- focus on more nonfiction reading, beginning in the younger grades
- introduce more robust vocabulary

As we continue with the school year, we are pleased with the results so far. Language Lab, with its collaboration of teachers of the deaf, speech teachers, and interpreters, has proven beneficial not only to students from other countries but to all deaf and hard of hearing students in our program. We want to continue to improve what has turned out to be an important initiative. We sent a survey to our teachers asking for their input. Here are some suggestions we received:

- Add subject-specific vocabulary. How might math, science, and social studies vocabulary be incorporated?
- Include longer passages in reading. How might discourse-level text be incorporated?
- Ensure continuity. How do we manage scheduling with speech teachers, interpreters, and students whose schedules vary individually throughout the day?
- Include all levels. How do we incorporate the three elementary students who have not yet received Language Lab because they have scheduling conflicts due to their placement in remedial programs?
- Assess on entry. Can we develop a language profile for students arriving from other countries at the signed, speaking, listening, reading, and writing levels?

We continue to reflect on student success with Language Lab, and our speech teachers and interpreters are enthusiastic about their collaboration. They have begun to notice literacy improvements, and the teachers of the deaf have noticed improvements in the classroom as well. The unexpected teaming of speech teachers and interpreters, working together with the teachers of the deaf, continues to be a win-win situation for our deaf and hard of hearing students, both those who are new to our country and those who have grown up here. It has allowed us to keep our expectations high for all of our students.

*Note: Visit www.thecurriculumcorner.com for some excellent activities and ideas using the Fry word lists.*
Language Lab Objectives

By Union Street School for the Deaf, Bergen County Special Services

VOCABULARY ACQUISITION AND USE:

1st

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.4
Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 1 reading and content, choosing flexibly from an array of strategies.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.4.a
Use sentence-level context as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.4.b
Use frequently occurring affixes as a clue to the meaning of a word.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.4.c
Identify frequently occurring root words (e.g., look) and their inflectional forms (e.g., looks, looked, looking).

2nd

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.2.4
Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 2 reading and content, choosing flexibly from an array of strategies.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.2.4.a
Use sentence-level context as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.2.4.b
Determine the meaning of the new word formed when a known affix is added to a known word (e.g., agreeable/disagreeable, comfortable/uncomfortable, care/careless, heat/preheat).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.2.4.c
Use a known root word as a clue to the meaning of an unknown word with the same root (e.g., company, companion).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.2.4.d
Use glossaries or beginning dictionaries, both print and digital, to determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases.

3rd

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.4
Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning word and phrases based on grade 3 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.4.a
Use sentence-level context as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.4.b
Determine the meaning of the new word formed when a known affix is added to a known word (e.g., agreeable/disagreeable, comfortable/uncomfortable, care/careless, heat/preheat).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.4.c
Use a known root word as a clue to the meaning of an unknown word with the same root (e.g., company, companion).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.4.d
Use glossaries or beginning dictionaries, both print and digital, to determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases.

4th

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.4
Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 4 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.4.a
Use context (e.g., the overall meaning of a sentence or paragraph; a word’s position or function in a sentence) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.4.b
Use context (e.g., definitions, examples, or restatements in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.4.c
Use context (e.g., cause/effect relationships and comparisons in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.4.d
Use context (e.g., cause/effect relationships and comparisons in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

5th

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.4.
Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.4.a
Use context (e.g., cause/effect relationships and comparisons in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.4.b
Use context (e.g., cause/effect relationships and comparisons in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.4.c.
Use context (e.g., cause/effect relationships and comparisons in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.5.c.
Use context (e.g., cause/effect relationships and comparisons in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.6.4.
Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.6.4.a
Use context (e.g., cause/effect relationships and comparisons in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.6.4.b
Use context (e.g., cause/effect relationships and comparisons in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.6.4.c.
Use context (e.g., cause/effect relationships and comparisons in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.6.5b.
Use context (e.g., cause/effect relationships and comparisons in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.6.5c.
Use context (e.g., cause/effect relationships and comparisons in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.7.6.
Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases; gather vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.7.4a.
Use context (e.g., the overall meaning of a sentence, paragraph, or text; a word’s position or function in a sentence) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.7.5.b.
Use the relationship between particular words (e.g., synonym/antonym, analogy) to better understand each of the words.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.8.6.
Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases; gather vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.8.4a.
Use context (e.g., the overall meaning of a sentence or paragraph; a word’s position or function in a sentence) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.8.4c.
Consult general and specialized reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses) both print and digital, to find the pronunciation of a word or determine or clarify its precise meaning or its part of speech.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.8.5b.
Use the relationship between particular words to better understand each of the words.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.9-10.4.
Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grades 9-10 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.9-10.4.a
Use context (e.g., the overall meaning of a sentence, paragraph, or text; a word’s position or function in a sentence) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.9-10.4.b
Identify and correctly use patterns of word changes that indicate different meanings or parts of speech (e.g., analyze, analysis, analytical; advocate, advocacy).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.9-10.4.c
Consult general and specialized reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation of a word or determine or clarify its precise meaning, its part of speech, or its etymology.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.9-10.4.d
Verify the preliminary determination of the meaning of a word or phrase (e.g., by checking the inferred meaning in context or in a dictionary).