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ATTITUDINAL CHANGES OF EMPLOYERS TO HEARING IMPAIRED WORKERS AFTER UTILIZING AN ASL/AWARENESS VIDEOTAPE: A PILOT STUDY

Sandy Silver¹

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Potential employers and staff of deaf/hard of hearing employers were surveyed focusing on their attitudes, knowledge and anxiety towards the hearing impaired. An instructional videotape was developed and presented focusing on work related American Sign Language (ASL) vocabulary and awareness issues. A pre- and post-test were administered to determine significant changes and perceived levels of comfort with regard to this population and employment. Results indicated that there was a significant improvement in attitudes after viewing the videotape. Additionally, there was a markedly positive indication regarding the hiring of hearing impaired workers.

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The final goal in the vocational rehabilitation process is job placement and retention. In the case of a deaf or hard of hearing individual, regardless of his/her level of expertise and capability, employers are confronted by communication issues and concerns. Obtaining and effectively utilizing a sign language interpreter or FM system imposes an immediate negative barrier in the initial interview process. Preconceptions exist and accommodations are not necessarily considered due to the available pool of other equally qualified (disabled or non-disabled) job applicants. Obvious long term employment concerns compound these issues in addition to the cost and delays involved in procuring qualified interpreter services or equipment in order to convey necessary daily business information and operation.

Employers have legal obligation, under the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act, to hire qualified workers who have disabilities. Vocational rehabilitation is often called upon to assist in the recruitment process in order to alleviate employer concerns

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and misperceptions. Vocational rehabilitation agencies can provide initial interpreter services and may be able to provide adaptive equipment. Long term support services may be applicable in terms of Job Coaches (with manual communication skills), and ten weeks of American Sign Language classes may be offered. The latter is an effective way to sensitize supervisors and co-workers thereby easing the transition of the new deaf/hard of hearing employee into the work environment. Unfortunately, the provision of these classes generally occurs after the employee has begun employment and, although beneficial, the immediate benefit is lost.

Employers often ask for sign language classes to conclude prior to the employee starting employment. Primarily due to employer hiring practices, time constraints and policies within the vocational rehabilitation system, this is not possible. One solution to this dilemma was to develop a "work related" sign language videotape with an awareness training component.

Most studies in this area have focused on acquisition and retention of sign language via computer assisted instruction versus videotaped presentations. Short and long term memory were measured by signs classified as iconic, opaque and abstract. Iconic signs closely resemble the object or activity to which they refer. Whereas opaque and abstract signs are less visually representative or connected to the concept they describe.

Mills (1984) found that the ability of hearing adults to learn sign language depended on two factors: the translucency of the sign and the concreteness of the referent. Translucency of the sign is the degree of similarity between a sign and its meaning, as judged by those learning the sign. Concreteness of the referent (as opposed to abstract) is the object or activity to which is being referred. Luftig and Lloyd (1981) found that referents that are highly concrete are easier to learn in a variety of situations with hearing, deaf and mentally retarded students.

Rosch, Mervis, Gray, Johnson and Boyes-Braem (1976) discussed the Basic Object Level (BOL). They viewed lexical items such as "chair" as basic and representative of linguistic function at the BOL. Brown's (1977) expectations were based on the assumption that subjects would make the mental connection between signs and referent. Brown hypothesized that iconic signs, when resemblance between the sign and the referent could easily be recognized, would be three times more likely to be learned and remembered than abstract signs.

Using this literature as a guideline the author developed a videotape to influence employer attitudes while teaching some basic concepts of American Sign Language. This paper describes a pilot study to evaluate the effectiveness of such a videotape.

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Method

A script for the videotape was developed with the assistance of vocational rehabilitation counselors for the deaf for key "work related" vocabulary. The final script was reviewed by four deaf individuals – two of which are teachers of ASL. Open captions were used for vocabulary words as well as the awareness section. Descriptions of vocabulary were done aurally and graphically to reinforce the key vocabulary words.

A pre-test and a post-test were administered to determine knowledge, anxiety levels and attitudes. Participants included 35 employers, supervisors and coworkers, as well as teachers (general and special education), job recruiters, sign language interpreters and vocational rehabilitation counselors.

Handout materials were distributed for future reference. These included some tips for communicating with deaf and hard of hearing individuals, the telephone number of the New York State Relay Service, an audiological chart graphically indicating sounds which can be heard at each frequency and a chart indicating what people can hear with different degrees of hearing loss.

A pre-test was administered requesting participant's current information, knowledge and anxiety level regarding deaf and hard of hearing individuals. A five point scale was utilized. Afterwards, the 40 minute videotape was presented. A post-test was given asking similar questions about the participant's new perceptions and attitudes. A similar five point scale was utilized for the purpose of comparison. Statistical analysis utilized the Z sign test.

Discussion

The videotape presentation proved to be positive and significant. After viewing the videotape the viewers felt more comfortable about perceived interactions with hearing impaired persons. Based upon the comment section of the survey, most viewers had limited exposure to manual communicators but seemed to have a greater understanding and empathy to hard of hearing individuals. Of greater significance is the fact that viewers would strongly consider hiring or working with a hearing impaired person after viewing the videotape.

Based upon the statistics, the viewers attitudes had changed to be more positive then prior to this presentation. Certain fears or misperceptions may have been allayed and some basic, but directly applicable, work related vocabulary had been conveyed.

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While this study is preliminary and limited by the nature of the subjects and its design, the results indicate that a videotape format can be successful in changing attitudes of the viewers. The participants were more accepting of working with hearing impaired persons at the conclusion of the videotape. Therefore, it is conceivable that if a hearing impaired person begins employment in an environment where an awareness and sensitivity are already established, then this person will have an equal opportunity to be successful in an employment setting as would any other qualified worker.

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