

The Role of Oral Communicators for General Qualifications

Research Study Conducted for
The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)



Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority

June – July 2007

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Introduction

This report contains the results of research undertaken by Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute on behalf of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). The research was conducted between June and July 2007 and comprised four school case studies (depth interviews and mini groups among deaf candidates, teachers and teaching assistants) and a discussion group with oral communicators.

Background and objectives

The provision of oral communicators in public examinations was removed from the Joint Council of Qualifications (JCQ) regulations in 2004. However, the regulatory authorities' position is that oral communicators are a "reasonable adjustment" for candidates with potential language comprehension difficulties. A pilot was needed to test the validity of this assumption and to feed into the JCQ regulations and guidance for the use of oral communicators in 2008.

As part of this pilot, Ipsos MORI was commissioned by QCA on behalf of a research partnership of JCQ, awarding bodies and diversity specialist organisations to carry out qualitative research to investigate the need of deaf candidates¹ for oral communicators, and to add insights on how the role of oral communicators might be defined so as to maintain the validity of assessment objectives. Other strands of the pilot conducted during the May/June examination session include: observation of oral communicators in live examinations; scoping of the demand for oral communicators; research by QCA in schools where candidates have other learning difficulties and/or disabilities such as dyslexia and aphasia. Further research will take place in November/December 2007.

Specifically, the partnership wanted to identify areas of good practice, any areas of bad practice, and to explore wider issues about the use of oral communicators in public examinations. Question areas included:

- How do oral communicators assist the candidate in an examination? What works and what does not work for the candidate?
- What possible advantages/disadvantages may an oral communicator present to a candidate?
- To what extent do oral communicators understand the difference between carrier and technical language and how this can be made clearer if need be?

¹ For the purpose of this research, the term 'deaf candidates' describes those who are candidates for public examinations (for example GCSE or A level examinations), and who have any form or level of hearing loss, from mild to profound.

- Which candidates should be eligible to use an oral communicator and what evidence of need should be required before a candidate can use an oral communicator?
- Who would be expected to diagnose a relevant impairment and how is that quality controlled? Or indeed how much do the participants know about this and how much do they think they should know?
- Who should be eligible to act as an oral communicator?
- What instructions/guidance should be given to oral communicators?

Methodology

The chosen approach was to conduct qualitative research with deaf students and their teachers through case studies in schools, and one discussion group with oral communicators, after first obtaining advice and consultation from experts in the field of disabilities and examinations through scoping interviews.

1. Scoping interviews with awarding body/disability group delegates

Ipsos MORI carried out initial scoping interviews by telephone with five experts in the field of disabilities and public examinations:

- Len Belton, Assistant CE, Welsh Joint Committee (WJEC)
- Karen Hughes, Head of Standards & Accreditation, Edexcel
- Susan Daniels, CE, National Deaf Children's Society
- Paul Simpson, CE, British Association of the Teachers of the Deaf (BATOD)
- Cathy Barnes, Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People (CACDP)

Through these interviews, we were able to obtain advice on: which categories and degrees of deafness and learning disabilities to target for the research; any issues pertinent to each category of students (practical, political or otherwise); and current thinking on the use of oral communicators.

2. Case studies in schools

Four case studies were carried out in a range of schools between Wednesday 20th June and Wednesday 4th July 2007 to provide insight into the needs of deaf candidates, their teachers and examinations officers. Conducting the research in schools brought a number of advantages:

- Added insight into candidates' learning/examination environment;
- Interviewing candidates, their teachers and examinations officers gives a more holistic picture;

- Candidates feel more comfortable in a familiar setting; and
- Teachers and learning assistants can provide support to candidates if necessary during the research.

Schools were selected to ensure that the research covered different types of schools and deaf candidates with different degrees of deafness. The number and types of interviews conducted for each case study were largely dependent on the type of school, the mix of students and the range of subjects taught.

Case Study	Candidates	Teachers/other
1. Special school 55 deaf candidates, South East of England	2 mini-groups (8 moderately to profoundly deaf candidates in total)	1 paired depth with teacher of deaf and examinations officers
2. Special school 226 deaf candidates, South East of England	2 mini-groups (8 moderately to profoundly deaf candidates in total)	1 depth with examinations officers/teacher of deaf
3. Mainstream school with special unit 20 deaf candidates, South East of England	1 mini-group (5 candidates, moderately to profoundly deaf)	1 depth with SEN officers 1 depth with teacher of deaf 1 depth with Learning Support Assistant/oral communicator
4. Mainstream school without special unit 2 deaf candidates, East of England	1 depth with profoundly deaf candidate	1 depth with teacher of the deaf 1 depth with examinations officers

By interviewing candidates either individually or in very small groups (i.e. paired depth interviews and mini groups) we could target specific groups of candidates with the same background/disability, enabling us to draw clearer conclusions about their needs according to their background/disability.

3. Discussion group with oral communicators of deaf students

One discussion group with seven oral communicators was conducted on the 6th July 2007. This approach allowed participants to share their thoughts and experiences within a homogenous group setting. The group lasted 90 minutes.

Recruitment

QCA provided Ipsos MORI with contact details of organisations representing the deaf, awarding bodies, oral communicators and schools for the purposes of this research.

Advance letters were sent to all selected schools and oral communicators, co-signed by Ipsos MORI and QCA, outlining the aims of the research and the format of the case studies or discussion group (two versions of the letter were drafted – one for schools and one for oral communicators). This was followed up by telephone/email recruitment by the research team at Ipsos MORI.

Participants welcomed the opportunity to contribute to this research, indicating high levels of interest in the consultation and pilot.

Analysing the responses

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. After an initial brainstorming session among the research team, the key findings were discussed at an interim debrief meeting with QCA, at which representatives from JCQ, the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) were also present to provide comment. Ipsos MORI then drafted the report, making use of notes from interviews, the brainstorming session and interim debrief, as well as verbatim comments from the interview transcripts.

Interpreting the data

Two of the key strengths of qualitative research are that it allows issues to be explored in detail and enables researchers to test the strength of people's opinion. However, it needs to be remembered that qualitative projects are designed to be *illustrative* rather than *statistically representative* and therefore do not allow conclusions to be drawn about the extent to which views are held. In addition, it is important to bear in mind that we are dealing with perceptions, rather than facts.

Acknowledgements

Ipsos MORI would like to thank all of the schools and participants who spared their valuable time to take part in the research and share their views with us.

We would also like to thank Di Barber at QCA for her collaboration throughout the project, Susan Daniels at NDCS, Nick Lait at JCQ and Andrew Boyle at QCA for their contributions at the interim debrief, and Margaret Copeland at Leicester County Council and Paul Simpson at BATOD for their help with recruitment.

Publication of the data

As with all our studies, findings from this survey are subject to our standard Terms and Conditions of Contract. Any press release or publication of the

findings requires the advance approval of Ipsos MORI. Such approval will only be refused on the grounds of inaccuracy or misrepresentation.

Executive Summary

Introduction

Research about the role of oral communicators for general qualifications was undertaken by Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute on behalf of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). The research was conducted between June and July 2007 and comprised four school case studies (depth interviews and mini groups among deaf candidates, teachers and teaching assistants) and a discussion group with oral communicators.

Ipsos MORI was commissioned by QCA to carry out qualitative research to investigate the need of deaf candidates for oral communicators, and to add insights on how the role of oral communicators might be defined so as to maintain the validity of assessment objectives.

Key findings

Reasonable adjustments for general qualifications

The teachers of the deaf who took part in the research are generally in agreement that public examinations would discriminate unfairly against some deaf students where they cannot access the question or paper in a way that their peers might. This is because some deaf candidates can find it hard to decipher and remember words in examination papers, particularly in subjects where examination papers can include large chunks of text, such as the humanities.

Among the four schools participating in the research, there has been widespread use of readers for deaf candidates in public examinations as an alternative or last resort when oral communicators were prohibited in 2004. Of those who have used readers, views on how helpful they are to deaf candidates are mixed; for some they are seen to provide useful support, while for others having a question simply read out to them is not sufficient as they need the carrier language explained.

Modified examination papers are used by many of the deaf candidates in the study, and on the whole considered to improve a deaf candidate's ability to access examination papers. They are also considered to reduce or sometimes completely remove the need of a candidate for an oral communicator. However, teachers of the deaf and oral communicators state that improvements can be made to the modification of examination papers for deaf candidates; simpler carrier language should be used and better structuring, in order to avoid discriminating against deaf candidates.

The role of oral communicators

Oral communicators are used to varying degrees by the schools included in this research. The extent of their use depends on the number of deaf candidates and the degree of their deafness, as well as the school's approach to deafness and language communication.

There is some uncertainty concerning the definition of the role of oral communicators among students, although school staff are generally aware of their function. Most participants involved in this research understand the concepts of "carrier" and "technical" language, and are able to give examples of where carrier language could usefully be explained. However, a minority of oral communicators and/or teachers were not clear about the difference between carrier and technical language and would welcome paper-specific guidance on what they can and cannot explain. Participants show an understanding of the difference between readers and oral communicators: while the role of a reader is limited to reading out text in an examination paper, oral communicators are permitted to explain the carrier language in questions. However, what an oral communicator does was less well understood in the school where sign language was principally used.

Participants appreciate the skill involved in being an oral communicator, and acknowledge that some training may be necessary. If not a qualified teacher of the deaf, the fact that JCQ requires that an oral communicator be appointed by them was seen as a positive regulation. Most important to them, however, was that oral communicators need to be familiar to the candidates whom they are assisting, so as to put them at ease in the pressured examination environment. In addition, they felt that oral communicators should have some knowledge/understanding of the subject being examined.

The advantages to a deaf candidate of having an oral communicator in a public examination are emphasised by all participating in this study, and many highlight the negative implications of their removal in 2004. Without the help of oral communicators, it is thought that deaf candidates are hindered in their ability to process and answer examination questions, putting them at an unfair disadvantage to their hearing peers or deaf peers using other provisions. That is not to say that all deaf candidates who use this provision in class would make use of an oral communicator in a public examination, but their presence provides reassurance that support is on hand if necessary.

Drawbacks of using an oral communicator are that being observed by an extra person during an examination may put additional pressure on the candidate, and be a possible distraction with an oral communicator walking around the room. There is also a misunderstanding about what appears on the examination certificate; some participants think that the use of an oral communicator would appear on a deaf candidate's certificate and are concerned about potential discrimination arising from this. This is a misunderstanding that needs to be corrected if oral communicators are to be reintroduced, or continue to be piloted.

Teachers are concerned with ensuring that they prepare the deaf candidate for the examination environment. Teachers did not ask for greater clarity on this issue; however, as findings also indicate that there is some, limited, misunderstanding of what an oral communicator can do in the examination situation, there may be some of the wrong type of expectations raised in preparing deaf candidates for examinations where oral communicators are used.

Very few participants in the research perceive any animosity towards deaf candidates regarding the use of oral communicators, although there is a minority view that there is a small amount of animosity from non-disabled (or disabled and non-eligible) candidates for the use of reasonable adjustments in general.

Eligibility for the use of an oral communicator in an examination situation

When considering who should be eligible to use an oral communicator there are different views. Some teachers and deaf candidates tend to think that an oral communicator should be made available to anyone who feels they need help in an examination situation, regardless of their type or level of disability. Others feel that the need for an oral communicator should be demonstrated – by showing that a teacher of the deaf believes the candidate needs this provision. There is also a feeling that the use of a test to demonstrate need would protect them from criticism from the wider public and be fairer because there would be obvious consistency in the treatment of candidates between different centres. The last point is illustrated by the one deaf candidate who said that he thought it was fair that he was refused the oral communicator he wanted in the examination, because his reading comprehension ability did not come out below average in the test.

The majority of students and teachers interviewed feel that the tests currently available for gauging ability in reading, vocabulary and grammar are not entirely appropriate for testing reading comprehension.

Some teachers of the deaf feel it is unfair that eligibility tests are only required of students that communicate orally, and not for those that communicate using British Sign Language. They feel it would make the system fairer if tests were standardised for all students, so that no one is disadvantaged as a result of their communication method.

Practical considerations of having an oral communicator

Some participants feel that, when it comes to regulating oral communicators, the regulators and/or awarding bodies need to have a certain level of control to provide transparency of process, and ensure the same level of service is offered to each candidate. However, all teachers and oral communicators who took part in this research believe that oral communicators should also be given a certain

level of freedom to use their own professional integrity and expertise to support a deaf candidate in a public examination.

The practical issues of providing oral communicators for schools revolve around the challenges of resourcing, such as finding additional rooms, timetabling and completing the necessary paperwork. However, despite one school saying that the level of bureaucracy would deter them from applying for oral communicators in the future, as long as there is adequate time to make arrangements, the other schools that took part in this research say they would find ways of overcoming any logistical constraints in order to do what is best for their students.

Methodology

Qualitative research was conducted with 22 deaf candidates/students and eight of their teachers through case studies in schools between Wednesday 20th June and Wednesday 4th July 2007. In addition, one discussion group with seven oral communicators was carried out on the 6th July 2007.

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Reasonable Adjustments for General Qualifications

In this section we explore the types of adjustments that schools use for deaf candidates, including readers, interpreters, modified examination papers, preparing students for their examinations, and finally, their involvement with oral communicators.

Why do deaf candidates need oral communicators as opposed to other types of reasonable adjustment?

There is unanimous agreement among deaf candidates, teachers and oral communicators involved in this research that reasonable adjustments are necessary to enable access and bring deaf candidates up to a level playing field in public examinations.

There is the general feeling among the teachers of the deaf that were interviewed that public examinations would discriminate unfairly against some deaf students due to their lower comprehension ability as they are not able to access the question or paper in a way that their peers might.

They might have good functional mathematical ability in Maths, but they can't access [exams] to demonstrate their knowledge because they can't pick out what they need to pick out from the question.

ToD², Special school

I've got children who'll get grade Bs and Cs on practical project work and they can go into exams and get Es and Fs.

ToD, Special school

According to participants, it is hard for some deaf candidates to decipher words from a lengthy passage of text in an examination and, as one deaf candidate explained, it can be difficult to remember words.

I can never remember what I've written down on paper unless it's massive and colourful. And so I sit there and...there'll be a word and I'll think, right, when did we

² Teachers of deaf candidates

do that in this lesson? I try to think back to what happened

Candidate, Special school

The ability of a deaf candidate to perform in an examination also depends on the subject in question; those which are text-heavy are considered to be more problematic than others.

It's mainly ICT that I have trouble with...because there are a lot of words

Candidate, Special school

I think we find our hearing impaired students really struggle with humanities, so history and geography, particularly history is a difficulty.

ToD, Mainstream school with special unit

Preparing deaf candidates for examinations

Teachers included in this research have a lot of experience in preparing deaf candidates for examinations, and many feel passionately that their job is to make sure candidates have adequate knowledge to be able to take examinations.

If we've done our job properly they're going to understand.

ToD, Special school

Teachers also feel it is important that candidates are prepared for the kind of reasonable adjustment available in the examination setting, and so they are given such concessions throughout lessons and during internal examination situations in preparation. However, some teachers also feel that all types of support available in the classroom should follow through into examinations.

Generally speaking there should be access arrangements that they have for lessons anyway so it's something that they're used to, they're used to having readers or they're used to having TAs working with them one to one. And then we discuss with the students and their parents and the school what exam concessions we think would be applicable and then for all the internal exams and tests those are put in place as well so that the student gets used to having the concession

ToD, Mainstream school

Teachers are concerned with ensuring that they prepare the deaf candidate for the examination environment. As findings elsewhere indicate that there is some, limited, misunderstanding of what an oral communicator can do in the examination situation; there may be some of the wrong type of expectations raised in preparing deaf candidates for examinations where oral communicators are used.

Involvement with readers/interpreters

The schools participating in this research that provide facilities for disabled students other than deaf students have considerable experience of using readers, in particular with blind candidates. JCQ Access Arrangements allow a reader where the candidate has a visual impairment or distortion, or can demonstrate reading comprehension ability below average. Even though readers have a completely different role to oral communicators (they read only and cannot explain in any way), readers appear to have been used as an alternative of last resort to oral communicators after the latter were prohibited in 2004. This use of readers appears to have dwindled when oral communicators were piloted in the summer of 2007, but there is still a misconception amongst deaf candidates that readers might be an alternative to oral communicators.

I think it does help. I mean getting it into your head and it helps you concentrate more and think about the questions

Candidate, Special school

It never really helped me so I never bothered asking for help again...Because all they do is just read it [the question] out and I just hear...that's it. It just [doesn't] really help. It [doesn't] really make me to get thinking

Candidate, Special school

One special school included in this study did not reapply for oral communicators instead of readers during this year's examinations, because they had to resubmit the same test documentation for oral communicators that they had already submitted for readers. This will be discussed in the 'practical issues for schools' section, later in this report.

Modified examination papers

Participants generally agree that modified examination papers can be of some help in enabling students with limited language comprehension to access examination papers.

What was a big step forward was when the modified papers came in...that did make a difference I have to say.

ToD, Special school

Modified papers are used by many, but not all, of the deaf candidates included in this study depending on their level of need. Some school staff feel that the need

for an oral communicator can be lessened, or sometimes completely removed, by the use of modified papers.

Sometimes you do get a paper which has been extremely well done...and you don't have to do very much communicating, which is what we would prefer, if the children could attack these things as independently as possible.

Oral Communicator

However, modified examination papers are not always an adequate adjustment for candidates. Some argue that if modified examination papers paid more attention to the needs of deaf candidates, then fewer would need to use oral communicators, and those that do would need to consult an oral communicator less frequently under examination conditions.

But how are those papers modified? I've been told people receive papers to be modified then they do a rush job and they'll go through and pick out a few things but not all of the things that need modifying, and you get tremendous, a lack of consistency even within one paper.

Oral Communicator

They say we've modified papers but when you look at a normal paper and then you look at a modified paper you think, well where's the difference?

LSA, Mainstream school with special unit

In addition, oral communicators assert that modifying language is not sufficient in itself. The *structure* of the papers does not always take into consideration the needs of deaf candidates – large blocks of text are daunting for a student with poor English language skills, and such candidates may simply not attempt to answer questions that they are, in fact, capable of responding to.

Furthermore, some school staff members feel strongly that there is still room for improvement in modifying examination papers, and some are highly critical, claiming that complex carrier language is still frequently included.

Even though the questions are always supposed to be modified, they don't really look that modified to me.

LSA³, Mainstream with specialist unit

They may say BATOD has been involved [in modifying the paper], but it doesn't necessarily mean that they've

³ Learning Support Assistants

listened to BATOD. So you still may be left with an exam that has been apparently modified at source, but still, there are the nuances of English there.

ToD, Mainstream with specialist unit

Involvement with oral communicators

There is considerable variation between the schools included in this study in their level of involvement with oral communicators in the examination process. Much depends on the numbers of candidates involved, the extent of their deafness, the type of school, and their approach to deafness and language (i.e. whether to use British sign language or oral communication).

I'm working with someone who has a moderate hearing loss, which wasn't diagnosed until she was eight or nine, so she's got delayed language so she needs an oral communicator because of the language problem

ToD, Mainstream school

They read the question for me. If there's some words I don't understand I ask, but some, if it's a maths word they don't tell you though

Candidate, Mainstream school

If we didn't understand what the question was about we would just put our hand up and they would come, explain what it meant, or they would write it on a piece of paper, explaining what the word meant

Candidate, Special school

Only one out of the four schools interviewed does not make use of oral communicators at all. Of those who do make use of oral communicators, most do so orally, with the exception of the mainstream school with a special unit, who use both British Sign Language (BSL) and Sign Supported English (SSE)

In the exam for example we would sign the question if it's required. So it's written in English but we would sign it in BSL for them...or SSE, Sign Support English. But there's certain criterion. There's things that we're allowed to sign and things that we can't sign, which is where it all gets a bit complicated

ToD, Mainstream school with a special unit

The Role of Oral Communicators

In this section we explore how different audiences define the role of oral communicators, in particular how, if at all, this is perceived to be different from the role of readers and interpreters. The key advantages for a deaf candidate in receiving this support in examinations, as well as any potential disadvantages, are then considered. Staff and students also give their views on the perception of oral communicators by wider audiences; if these differ, and if any problems arise as a result.

Defining the role of oral communicators

The term “oral communicator” is not always understood, particularly by students, and specifically at a school where sign language is employed. In this case, it is referred to as “signed support” – the principal remaining the same, but with the carrier language being explained in BSL and SSE rather than English.

In general, however, there is a high level of understanding of the role of oral communicators in general examinations, possibly reflecting the timing of fieldwork, which took place soon after examinations had taken place.

Somebody who's there to read the question which isn't necessarily the role as defined by JCQ but to read the question and to rephrase if necessary. And that may be at the request of the student taking the exam or it may be that you come across a sentence which is a long complicated sentence that you know they're going to struggle with so you take the initiative and perhaps break it down into smaller bullet points

ToD, Mainstream school

Although “technical language” and “carrier language” are not always expressed using these terms, particularly by students, all audiences are familiar with these as concepts. Some cite examples of where the carrier language could usefully be explained:

Words like “feature”. What features can you identify? They wouldn't understand that.

LSA, Mainstream school with a special unit

So words like “factor”, they wouldn't understand what factor is, but we would change it to say things. What things could you identify rather than what factors could you identify.

Candidate, Mainstream school with a special unit

Students and staff alike are comfortable with the differences between oral communicators and readers, highlighting that the key difference between the two is that an oral communicator needs far greater knowledge and understanding of a subject in order to have the skills to explain carrier language of a particular question.

If we're talking readers I think somebody who can phrase questions well and read and pause in the right places is fine. If we're talking oral communicators you need knowledge of the subject, otherwise you're into the business of the possibility of rephrasing something.

ToD, Special school

A reader would just read the question, a communicator can explain the carrier language that the student doesn't understand.

Oral communicator

Readers are therefore seen to be of more limited use than oral communicators – however, there is more clarity involved in what readers can and cannot do, which can be seen as an advantage.

Reading is actually quite good because everybody knows what the parameters are.

ToD, Special school

In contrast, although the nature of carrier and technical language is widely understood, there is some concern over the ambiguity that can emerge in the role of oral communicators. Staff highlight the occasional difficulty that can be experienced in determining whether a word is simply part of the question, or whether it contains technical meaning that should not be explained to the deaf candidate.

I was looking at some Maths papers this morning and the word calculate, is that taught vocabulary or is that one you can rephrase?

Oral communicator

The word "adapted" came up which, in biology, adaptation has got a very specific meaning and it's actually not the everyday meaning. And the invigilator explained it but as chance would have it, explained it wrong, explained it in the everyday term when in the question it was the biological meaning that was wanted. So that didn't do the child any help.

Examinations officer/ToD, Special school

In light of this, staff would welcome paper-specific guidance indicating exactly what can and cannot be explained in an examination situation. This includes oral communicators themselves, who express a desire to make this process as fair and transparent as possible.

In the Key Stage Three tests you get a list with it of the words you're not allowed to explain... That would be brilliant.

Examinations officer/ToD, Special school

We should have had more guidance and we should have been given far more of what we're doing, because these are important exams. I want to be involved in it and I want to help, but you need to know where your boundaries are.

LSA, Mainstream school with special unit

Advantages of a deaf candidate having an oral communicator

Students and staff alike are clear about the advantages to deaf candidates in receiving support from an oral communicator. Deaf candidates, particularly those who are pre-lingually deaf, often have language impairments to the extent where not understanding the contents of an examination paper can hinder their ability to answer questions that they would otherwise be able to answer.

It is very important I think partly because of the lack of life experiences and the low linguistic level and just basic things like names of people and places which they [deaf candidates] might struggle with and not understand

ToD, Mainstream school

Very often you see the light go on as you read a question to them [students]

ToD, Special school

Staff working with deaf candidates are clear in their assertion that support from an oral communicator, rather than providing candidates with an unfair advantage, allows them access to the language of an examination, and gives them an opportunity to sit the examination on a more even footing with their hearing peers.

I think they are enabled to effect, to basically give their best in the examination, which is what it's all about.

SENCO, Mainstream school with special unit

It's absolutely vital that we're allowed this.

Examinations officer/ToD, Special school

In many cases, candidates that have access to an oral communicator do not make use of them during an examination. According to staff, this does not render the exercise redundant in such cases, but rather provides reassurance to candidates, and allows them to focus on the task in hand. This role of reassurance can be particularly strong if the student knows the oral communicator.

It's like a safety net, they know they could ask if they needed to, so it lowers the stress as they go into the exam, I think that's a good thing.

Examinations officer/ToD, Special school

If it's somebody that they're familiar with then maybe it puts them a little bit more at ease in an exam and reduces panic levels

ToD, Mainstream school

There is a sense among both students and staff of the importance of this support, with many warning of the implications were this to be taken away, and the latter referring to their experiences since oral communicators were withdrawn in 2004.

For years we've been telling the kids, if you don't understand a question, ask and we'll help if we're allowed to and then last year for the first time we were having to say, well sorry we're throwing you to the wolves a bit. It was hurtful, it was grossly unfair, seeing kids not understanding questions and it's not that they didn't know the subject.

Examinations officer/ToD, Special school

Last year we were told that we weren't allowed to change the words but it was an enormous problem.

LSA, Mainstream school with special unit

Without the support we wouldn't be able to do anything. We wouldn't understand the questions.

Candidate, Mainstream school with special unit

I felt that my students wouldn't even stand a cat in hell's chance of getting any marks on any paper had they not been able to have this opportunity of having an oral communicator.

Oral communicator

One of the key reasons why this support is seen as so important is the methods by which deaf students are taught throughout the year. To deny a candidate in an examination the support they have had while learning is seen as unfair, and does not allow them to demonstrate a potentially solid grasp of a subject.

This is what we do when we support these children over the course of their GCSE work and then suddenly not to be able to do it for them in the exam, well it's just like pulling the rug out from under them.

Oral communicator

Disadvantages of a deaf candidate having an oral communicator

Few disadvantages of having oral communicators are highlighted from the students' point of view.

Some argue that it could increase pressure on deaf candidates, having an extra person in the room watching their progress. Furthermore, there is widespread agreement that the process can be tiring for both communicator and candidate, depending on the level of assistance required in an examination.

I think they could become self conscious with a reader or an oral communicator, in that, somebody sitting across them and watching exactly what they're writing, which there's no way of getting round that, but that could be an added pressure for some students rather than decreasing the pressure

ToD, Mainstream school

You can't get away from the fact that having an oral communicator is a tiring process for them

Oral communicator

However, such disadvantages to students are cited with the qualification that the drawbacks of this support are outweighed by the advantages it presents to deaf candidates.

Are views shared by other students and teachers?

The overall feeling appears to be that the view of oral communicators as a reasonable adjustment is one that is shared by students and staff outside of the deaf community.

We've got some quite high flying students with hearing impairment but I don't think, no, there's no problem with regards the main school perceptions of this issue in my experience.

SENCO⁴, Mainstream school with special unit

They [other students] will have gone through the school with those students, so they I think probably they just accept that they have a disadvantage and that it has to be dealt with

Examinations officer, Mainstream school

I think it's fair because at the end of the day if they didn't have a reader then they'd be at a disadvantage because they wouldn't be able to if you like understand most of the questions. It's like I said it does help them, but it wouldn't help me.

(Non-eligible) Student, Special school

Furthermore, there are various special arrangements in place for students with all types of learning difficulties', so having an oral communicator is not necessarily considered to be out of the ordinary.

I think [student] doesn't feel that she's got any special arrangements because there are a lot of other children having special arrangements which may be different but nonetheless they're still special arrangements

ToD, Mainstream school

There is a sense among some students that there is a small amount of animosity around the support that deaf candidates receive in examinations.

You can tell that they're jealous of you ... I get the odd comment. Your teacher done your work and you're going to get an A in all your stuff.

Candidate, Mainstream school with special unit

However, this appears to be the minority view, and any such animosity could be the product of a lack of knowledge and understanding about the support that deaf candidates receive. This would suggest that such problems would continue whether the use of oral communicators was permitted or not.

I don't think the hearing children really are aware of the level of support that these guys have.

LSA, Mainstream school with special unit

I think it's unfair if someone is smarter than me and he's got a reader and I don't. That's when I would think it's unfair.

(Non-eligible) Student, Special school

⁴ Special Educational Needs Officer

Practical Considerations of Having an Oral Communicator

This section looks at the practicalities of providing oral communicators for deaf candidates: how to decide which candidates should be eligible for an oral communicator; what demonstration of need should be required; who should be eligible to act as an oral communicator, what instructions/guidance should be given to them; how (or whether) oral communicators should be regulated; and practical/logistical considerations for candidates and centres.

Who should be eligible to use an oral communicator?

Deaf candidates and their teachers generally feel that any candidate who feels they need an oral communicator should be eligible to use one. “Need” is difficult to assess; whereas some candidates with good communication skills are poor readers, others with poor communication skills can be very good readers.

That’s a difficult question...because we’ve got children here whose communication is very, very good, but their reading ability isn’t. And at the other extreme we’ve got the children whose oral ability is not very good at all, but their reading ability is brilliant

ToD, Special school

Some feel that any student who needs help with reading comprehension in their day-to-day learning should be eligible to use an oral communicator in an examination.

That is their normal learning environment and that’s how they should go and do their exams.

Oral Communicator

There is also some feeling that the provision of an oral communicator should be extended to candidates without a disability, if required.

Disability or no disability, everyone should have a choice

Candidate, Special school

If it was down to me I would say scrap all this and just go with any child that isn't sure what a question means should be allowed to ask...and I'm not talking now about deaf children...I don't think it's unreasonable, if you think that education is supposed to prepare us for life, if you suddenly found yourself with a job to do and there was a word there that you didn't know what it meant you'd look it up in the dictionary.

Examinations officer/ToD, Special school

On the whole, participants believe that teachers/centres should be trusted to judge whether their candidate requires an oral communicator. Teachers of the deaf are seen to have the necessary experience and qualifications to make this call.

You have to trust our professional judgement that we've said, yes an oral communicator is needed for this candidate.

ToD, Mainstream school with special unit

Is this child's language compromised? Is this child vulnerable? If the answer's yes, stick in an oral communicator. Who can answer that question? We do because we're professionals, we're qualified, we've got eons of experience and it's very galling that that experience is being questioned, undermined, like we need to produce a statistic, a figure.

Oral communicator

Which tests are most appropriate for gauging a candidate's language comprehension?

Participants cite the availability of various tests to determine whether a student is eligible for reasonable adjustments in examinations. The mainstream schools with/without a specialist deaf unit currently use a range of tests to measure reading, vocabulary and grammar.

For reading we use the Edinburgh Reading Test, and for vocabulary we use the British Picture Vocabulary Scale, BPVS. And to test the reception of grammar we use a test called TROG

ToD, Mainstream school

However, these tests are often deemed to be limited or inadequate for assessing language comprehension. One teacher of the deaf in a special school describes

the British Picture Vocabulary Scale test (BPVS) as “totally inappropriate” for testing reading comprehension.

BPVS is a test of vocabulary...they're [students] given four pictures and I say, dog, and they point to the picture of the dog. That's not a reading comprehension test, that's a receptive language test...[it is] totally inappropriate

ToD, Special school

Another test cited, Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (CELF), is considered *impractical* for determining eligibility for an oral communicator, as it needs to be administered by an educational psychologist.

That's [CELF] a test that educational psychologists do, one that we're not able to do. I think we would have a problem if we were going to use the tests that only educational psychologists were allowed to administer in that it would be a lot of additional work for us

ToD, Mainstream school

In addition to practical concerns about language comprehension tests, there is a concern that fewer students would qualify for reasonable adjustments in an examination if a language comprehension test were administered rather than a reading test.

We've got children whose expressive and receptive language orally far exceeds their ability to read, so we could be in a situation where...let's say 50% of our children wouldn't qualify on expressive and receptive vocabulary tests, but on reading tests we might get 60% qualify

ToD, Special school

However, the use of tests *per se* is controversial. There are concerns that candidates who are “borderline” in reading tests would be unfairly disadvantaged if they were refused an oral communicator on the grounds of narrowly passing a reading test. Others are worried that some candidates who do well in reading tests may genuinely need the help of an oral communicator in the more pressurised environment of a public examination. There is also a chance that some students may deliberately fail the test, so they are granted an Oral Communicator.

Somebody can do perfectly well on a reading test, particularly these borderline children who are just above that cut off point. You put them in an exam and they forget how to read

ToD, Special school

Someone could do really well in the reading test, but then when it comes down to it, it's like in an exam they could freeze and just not get the question

Candidate, Special school

Do you think anyone might not want to pass their reading test so that they could get a reader/oral communicator?

I'm tempted

Candidate, Special school

Some teachers feel that the current arrangement whereby British Sign Language (BSL) candidates are “automatically qualified” for reasonable adjustment (i.e. a BSL communicator) regardless of their reading ability and non-BSL deaf candidates are not constitutes “disability discrimination”. It is felt that all parts of the deaf community should be treated fairly, and no one should be disadvantaged for being taught orally as opposed to being taught using BSL: tests for one, tests for all (or tests for no one).

At the moment we're in a situation where if you are a sign language user you can have a BSL communicator regardless of your reading age, but if you're oral you have to have a reading age below a certain cut off point. That's not fair. That's disability discrimination. My children are being discriminated against on the basis of their communication method

ToD, Special school

If we're going to have to have reading comprehension for oral communicators then they've got to have them for signing communicators as well. I have no problem with the reading test. It will grieve me no end if I've got children who are just at the cut off point, but that's life. But they have to be fair between oral and sign because otherwise, and some people would say this is the case, I am actually disadvantaging my children by teaching them orally. And that can't be right when the world speaks

ToD, Special school

However, despite the wide-ranging opposition to reading and language comprehension tests seen among deaf candidates and their teachers, one teacher of the deaf in a mainstream school maintains that there is a case for some standardisation of the provision of oral communicators, so that the system is not “abused”.

There has to be some form of testing, some standardisation, because you don't want to abuse these oral communicators

ToD, Mainstream school

Who should be eligible to act as an oral communicator?

Teachers of the deaf appreciate that there is a lot of skill involved in being an oral communicator, and that training is necessary in order to act as one. However, deaf students who took part in the research tend to trust the fact that teachers are qualified enough in their own right, and so would therefore have adequate skills to help them in an examination situation. If not a qualified teacher of the deaf, the fact that oral communicators are appointed by such a person (as noted in the JCQ regulations), is seen to be a positive regulation

It is a big skill, frankly... I think the idea of it being okayed by a teacher of the deaf is a good one.

Oral communicator

I think they definitely need training; I'm not sure about qualifications

ToD, Mainstream school

Because they are teachers so they know what they can help us on, they know how to do it. So they don't really need, they are qualified teachers.

Candidate, Special school

A common feeling among students, teachers and oral communicators themselves is that an oral communicator needs to be someone that is familiar to the deaf candidate. This is seen to alleviate any unnecessary pressure that might be caused if working with a stranger in an examination setting.

As far as we're concerned whoever is communicating with the child has to be someone that is a well known person

ToD, Special school

For deaf students in particular it should be somebody whose voice they're familiar with

ToD, Mainstream school

This is particularly important if signing is being used to communicate examination questions, as the issue of personal style comes into question.

Signing is like an accent. Some people have their own versions of signs, so you have to get to know the person.

LSA, Mainstream school with special unit

On an individual level, an oral communicator needs to be someone that is easy for deaf candidates to understand, which is also highlighted in the JCQ regulations (“*the oral communicator should be a clear speaker and their lips must be visible*”).

It should be someone who most people can understand. If you can't understand them then it's no good, is it?

Candidate, Special school

Oral communicators should also have an understanding of the subject being examined, so that they are able to explain words and interpret the difference between carrier and technical language in an examination paper effectively.

You should have someone, like for Science someone who knows what science words are because...there are some really murderous words in science

Candidate, Special school

If you haven't been in with them in the lesson, how do you know what is technical and what is carrier language?

LSA, Mainstream school with special unit

In addition, it is important that oral communicators have practical experience of working with deaf candidates of a particular age so that they are able to communicate with them on an appropriate level.

I think you need to be somebody that's actually been working with students of the age that you're going to do oral communication for, so you'd need to be involved at a practical level in a school setting, not necessarily a subject specific person, not necessarily a teacher of the deaf.

Oral communicator

How should oral communicators be regulated?

There does not appear to be a consensus among teachers of the deaf regarding who should regulate oral communicators. While it is generally thought that examination boards need to have a certain level of regulation in place for the sake of transparency, it is also thought that oral communicators should be given some freedom to use their own professional integrity to rephrase examination questions according to the needs of individual deaf candidates.

I think the exam boards probably need to regulate it, but I think teachers of the deaf, oral communicators should also have some ability to regulate it themselves. Because you know that you can't rephrase a technical word or explain a technical word, you can only really rephrase the carrier language

ToD, Mainstream school

Practical issues of using an oral communicator

Although there is unanimous agreement that oral communicators are important in allowing deaf candidates access to examinations, a number of practical issues surrounding their provision are cited.

For the students

Some deaf candidates say that, in an examination situation, having oral communicators wandering around a room can sometimes be a distraction, especially when the noise of their footsteps interferes with their hearing aid.

Usually the women with high heels on. When they walk round it's noisy...It's a nightmare

Candidate, Special school

Thinking about future implications that the use of an oral communicator might have on a disabled candidate, there is a misconception that "use of oral communicator" is stated on an examination certificate. This is not the case; there is no notation of an oral communicator on the certificate. This misunderstanding needs to be corrected if oral communicators are to be reintroduced, or continue to be piloted, as the misconception leads candidates to fear that their employment opportunities might be affected.

He goes somewhere [employer] where he needs to do a lot of reading and they think, ah, he needs someone to read stuff to him, then that won't be very fair because he might not get a job

Candidate, Special school

I don't think that's necessary because if they're disadvantaged anyway, all you're doing is making up for that little bit of disadvantage really aren't you? You're not giving them an advantage, that's always clearly stated by the exam boards, that no concessions are designed to give them an advantage over other students, simply to make up the deficit so therefore there's no point in putting an indication on the certificate, which could act as a sort of stigma whenever they show that certificate to anybody

Examinations officer, Mainstream school

All you're giving them is what they need in order to be able to do that exam...you're not giving them an unfair advantage, or you shouldn't be giving them an unfair advantage. So I don't see why they need anything on their exam certificate at all

ToD, Mainstream school

For the school

There is a sense among staff that the challenges facing schools are considerable in providing oral communicator support for students. In particular, there are concerns over the amount of paperwork involved in applying for, and using an oral communicator – especially in schools with a large number of candidates who would require an oral communicator.

I think one of the huge challenges was the amount of paperwork that had to be completed in order to put it in place.

ToD, mainstream school

I wrote back to all the exam boards and said, I'm not filling in more forms you've, all these candidates [who] have got use of a reader already. You've had all the reading information you need, I need oral communicators

ToD, Special school

There are also resourcing issues facing schools, with pressure placed on examinations officers to find additional rooms for candidates using oral communicators, as well as extra staff to invigilate examinations.

There are various organisational things like the use of an oral communicator requires two invigilators because it requires somebody to read the paper and finding somebody else to note down the changes that are made which obviously means that you're not slowing down the process too much by having to note it down yourself. And it also requires three exam papers which if you've got more than one deaf child in a school, you will find it is quite a heavy commitment for the school to provide three exam papers per student

ToD, Mainstream school

We needed an extra invigilator...It was a lot harder because of this, for me, but for everybody else we can see the value of it and that's the great thing. There was no objection to it by any of the, any of my colleagues, because we see the value of it.

Examinations officer/ToD, Special School

Furthermore, it is observed by some that the use of oral communicators may present examinations officers with timetabling problems. Again, however, this will depend on the type of school and the extent to which oral communicators are used.

I'm sure it's fine if you've got one or two deaf children, but I know the grammar school for the deaf who have cohorts of 30 to a year, they don't use oral communicators partly because they just can't manage it

ToD, Special school

When they [deaf candidates] go into Year 11 and there's a whole range of exams, then there'll be huge implications in terms of timetabling for the exam secretary and the person who does the exam cover

ToD, mainstream school

Of the three schools that would consider applying for oral communicators, despite practical concerns, there is a feeling that these schools are determined to do the best for their students and will find ways of overcoming logistical challenges.

If we've got students that need concessions...we just have to accommodate them. We most certainly couldn't say, well that's it you can't, the student can't have an oral communicator...because we haven't got the room or the invigilators. We just couldn't do that could we really, so we would just accommodate them...Yes it is a problem room wise and it's also the fact that some rooms are not really good for exams because they're not sound proof enough, but we just have to do the best we can really

Examinations officer, Mainstream school

However, schools who took part in this research did find the short timescale of the pilot problematic, and would like to have more time in future to put in applications for oral communicators.

I think in future if we knew we could apply for an oral communicator we could be far more organised far earlier in the year

ToD, Mainstream school

They let us know that this [provision of oral communicators] was going to be allowed, which was middle of April, they gave us about two weeks to apply. And we had to test over 100 kids in those two weeks.

Examinations officer/ToD, Special School

Discussion Guides
