EDUCATION

Floyd College Computers Help Deaf Students Read

Deaf students and their teachers at Floyd College in Rome, Georgia are communicating in a foreign language. It's called English.

Thanks to a new interactive computer system designed specially for the hearing-impaired learner, students in developmental reading classes can now use written words and sentences, as well as the hand-formed symbols of sign language, to carry on classroom discussions and ask and answer questions about their lessons.

The 11-computer system, inaugurated winter quarter, is the only one of its kind in the Southeast, according to Michael Burton, coordinator of hearing-impaired services.

"Computer-assisted learning for the hearing-impaired is a major technological development, and we feel very fortunate to be able to add this tool to our program," Burton said.

In the past, he said, communication technology, such as the telephone, has put hearing-impaired people at greater disadvantage in the hearing society by replacing the face-to-face communication methods deaf people have relied upon.

"Computer technology, however, benefits the hearing impaired, obviously, because it bypasses the hearing-speech requirement of conversation," he said.

The new computer system for Floyd College's deaf students is a version of English Natural Form Instruction (ENFI), developed in 1984 at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. Gallaudet is the nation's only university for the hearing impaired.

Two Floyd College faculty members in the hearing-impaired program, Amelia Billingsley and Dondra Casey, went to Gallaudet last summer to train on the ENFI system. Ms. Billingsley also has training through the National Technical Institute for the Deaf in Rochester, NY.

Starting two years ago with three of the special computers, Floyd College's Russell Cheadle, associate professor of computer science, tested and modified the ENFI hardware and software to meet the college's unique needs and support its teaching goals.

Working with Ms. Billingsley and the school's maintenance personnel, Cheadle also designed and installed the 11-computer lab.

Students also work individually with commercially-prepared software, much like workbooks, which require them to read, type the answers to questions and compose sentences and paragraphs, or they may work with lessons the teacher has prepared and put on computer disks.

Building English vocabulary is one of the strengths of the system, the Floyd College educators point out. New words come hard to deaf individuals, many of whom have been deaf since birth.

Ms. Billingsley introduces new words by computer but students also learn vocabulary from each other as they take part in computerized discussions. Their personal interests, life experiences, and level of language development vary, as with any group of students, and they bring that personal vocabulary into the classroom discussion.

Another benefit of the computerized classroom is the ease of tailoring instructions to the needs of individual students, enabling them to start with skills they have and progress at their own speed.

Hearing-impaired students in teacher Dondra Casey's developmental English class use the computers with English tutorial software geared to their individual needs, and also work on English composition, concentrating on specific "English as a second language" skills.

The purchase of the 11-computer network was financed partially with a $7,225 grant from the University System of Georgia Board of Regents through the Special Funding Initiative and a matching investment by the college.

In addition to developmental reading and English classes, Floyd College provides interpreters and notetakers for hearing-impaired students taking regular classes and also special counseling and social services. Currently, 21 hearing-impaired students are among the over 1400 students enrolled at the two-year college, which is a unit of the University System of Georgia.