

Difficulties Faced by Teachers in Using American Sign Language in Deaf Classrooms in Cameroon

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Abstract: Deaf teachers have inadequate knowledge and professional training in American Sign Language (ASL) in Cameroon. Deaf learners are disadvantaged because of lack of signing competence from teachers. Teachers face problems in teaching many subjects since most of the signs referring to certain objects, practices and beliefs are absent in the culture of those who are not of American origin. A Cameroonian sign language should be developed and used in specialised settings. This study was done in four deaf schools: Morningstar, Mbingo, Ephphatha and Buea schools for the deaf. This descriptive survey made use of a questionnaire, interview and observation guides as instruments for data collection. The sample of the study was 30 teachers and 413 pupils from the four deaf schools. Findings indicate that teachers have insufficient knowledge on effective use of ASL during instructions (83%); Teachers adapted other modes of communication during instruction (90%). It was concluded that a Cameroonian sign language be developed while teacher training colleges and some departments in the Universities include sign language as a subject in their curriculum so that graduates are empowered with skills to teach pupils with special needs.

Keywords: ASL, adaptation, deafness, education, signing.

1. Introduction and the problem

Deaf pupils in Cameroon do not respond as adequately to their education as would normal children. They are disadvantaged and excluded from quality education because they do not have the opportunity to learn in the language they best understand. Teachers face problems in teaching most subjects since majority of the signs referring to certain objects, practices and beliefs are absent in the culture of those who are not of American origin. This affects their educational, emotional and social growth. Some factors are responsible for this problem:

1. Most of the teachers do not master ASL. A language is well taught by someone who is competent, that is a person who knows how to use the language in different situations. Special education teachers have linguistic difficulties as far as ASL is concerned. Kapp (2002) posits that many teachers have little knowledge or experience working with children with special needs. Without knowledge of human development and professional skills in instructional design and delivery, most of them will face many difficulties in special classrooms (Yuh 2014). Therefore, it is imperative that all teachers be well trained and equipped to teach children with special needs so that they can secure the future of all children.
2. Teaching deaf pupils is an extremely complex task (Bryant & Bryant 2008). Teachers therefore resort to the bilingual approach of using both oral English with sign language to teach. Finger-spelling is also heavily used to spell words. Owing to the fact that these teachers do not have proper training in ASL, communication is therefore limited.

Consequently, teachers need to employ a variety of communication methods, tasks, skills and activities to meet the different learning needs of auditive children since the classroom have pupils with complex challenges apart from being deaf. Some of them are slow learners, mentally retarded, hyperactive, emotionally challenged and others experience low socioeconomic status among others. With such a diverse deaf pupil population, effective communication and differentiated instruction is necessary to target each pupil's individual needs in the classroom.

Deaf children not only face communication difficulties in schools but they also encounter problems with their parents and other family members in their communities who do not master sign language. Delaying the child's access to a language that meets his immediate needs is obviously not good; hence, the child's linguistic, cognitive, social and personal development is at risk.

In order to avoid this problem, a comprehensive means of communication is important. The child is given the opportunity to learn sign language used by the deaf community and at the same time, learn also the oral language used by the hearing majority of people.

François Grossjean, professor of psycholinguistics at the University of Neuchatel, carried out research on the bilingual concept in educating deaf children. According to him, it is important that deaf children acquire sign language first because it allows them to communicate with their parents early and comprehensively. Communicating in sign language also plays an important role in the cognitive and social development of the child. It allows the child to learn about the world in general and, at the same time, to acculturate into the world of their deaf peers. In addition, sign language facilitates the acquisition of the oral language. It depends on the child which of these languages is emphasized. Some children use sign language more often, others focus on oral language, and some use both equally often. In any event, it is essential that deaf children be given a chance to grow up with both languages.

Specialised institutions in Cameroon are fully engaged since 1977 in providing access to quality education to all deaf pupils across the nation. The study was embarked with the following objectives.

1.1 Objective of the study

The study sought:

- To verify if teachers have acquired ASL skills in order to teach deaf pupils in Cameroon.
- To identify other modes of communication teachers adapt during instructions.
- To propose solutions to these problems.

The following research questions served as guidelines to the study:

1.2 Research Questions

RQ 1 - Have the teachers acquired the necessary skills in ASL to best perform their functions?

RQ 2- Which other modes of communication did the teachers adapt during the teaching process?

RQ 3 - What can be done to ameliorate communication problems during instruction?

1.3 Literature Review

Review of related literature examined the conceptual, theoretical and empirical framework. The conceptual frame examined concepts related to the topic. The theoretical frame dwelt on the Self-Efficacy theory as defined by Albert Bandura (1997) which supports the research in question. The empirical frame looked into previous research studies on similar topics and their short comings.

1.3.1 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual frame examined concepts that are related to the topic such as: The acquisition of sign language and teachers' professional training in ASL.

1.3.1.1 Acquisition and development of sign language

According to Rourke (1992) there are various uses of ASL and this shows the diversity of the contexts in which it is used in schools. Sign language is a fundamental part of everyday life of the deaf child, both at home and in school. One must recognise the importance of the acquisition of the English language and literacy skills for educational, vocational and career advancement. In spite of the fact that sign languages differ from spoken languages in a number of significant ways, it has been established that the progression through the stages of development for both languages is very similar. The stages of language development which have been explored include:

- ❖ Pre-linguistic communication (7-10 months)
- ❖ The first-sign /word stage (12-18 months)
- ❖ The two-sign /word stage (18-22 months)
- ❖ The more complex lexical and grammatical development stage (22-36 months).

One of the first significant similarities which have been identified concerns the role of babbling in pre-linguistic development. Vocal babbling enables hearing children to tune into and rehearse the sounds of the language they are developing and to engage in early interaction with their caretakers. It has been found that deaf children who are exposed to sign language also babble but manually in that they move their hands and arms in a specific repetitive way, thus engaging the caretaker in communicating.

At the one sign-word stage, deaf children produce individual signs in isolation, these usually include the sign *POINT* and as well as basic nouns and verbs such as *MUMMY* and *DRINK*. Deaf children develop their vocabulary at the same rate as hearing children acquire spoken vocabulary often over generalising, e.g. using *DOG* for all four legged animals or making errors in their sign production of new words. Some researchers even argue that the rate of acquisition of signs may be faster than that of words. This may be because the control of the vocal apparatus is harder to master than control of the hands or that the iconicity (visual similarity with the object) of some signs makes them easier to acquire. However, these differences tend to even themselves out and the general markers for hearing children of 10 words at 15 months and 50 words at 20 months also apply to deaf children's sign vocabulary development.

The similarity of rate and nature of the development of two languages is also evident at the two-word stage. In both signed and spoken language the two-word stage emerges at about the same time and the typical utterances are isolated single words without grammatical markings such as Mummy eat or Daddy shoe.

As deaf children begin to extend their sign language utterances between the age of 2 and 3 years they begin to use a wider range of the grammatical conventions of sign language. One indication of the child's developing sophistication with sign language grammar is their use of verb agreement. Although there is very little research into the development of deaf children's sign language between the ages of 3 and 6 years, the evidence collected so far indicates that the rate of grammatical progression parallels that of spoken languages.

The increasing interest in deaf education programmes for children points to a need for a standardised measure of sign language assessment as a way of monitoring the outcomes of such programmes. This is a landmark development for parents and all professionals involved with deaf children as it is a firm endorsement of the changing status of ASL and of the goals of deaf education. This concept is useful in this study because it throws light on issues of acquisition.

1.3.1.2 Teachers professional training in ASL

De Villiers, Wethmar and Van der Bank (2000: 30) claims that, a teacher is someone who possesses authority in the educative situation by virtue of his/her academic knowledge about education in general and his/her skills and competencies in imparting knowledge to learners. As a key figure in the successful implementation of special education policy, his competence imparting knowledge through sign language is of utmost importance.

Fadipeand Ojedele (1999) observed that communicative competence in sign language provides teachers with increase skills. Inadequately trained teachers can impose serious constraint both on the quality of education

and a negative impact on the potential achievement of deaf children. Teachers must have sound knowledge and training in ASL to be able to teach deaf children.

Sign language demonstrates that the human capacity for language is not bound by physical impairment and suggest that language is in the brain and may be expressed by humans in more than one modality. Further, it is believed that deaf learners whose learning context is mediated by sign language will have the same access as hearing learners whose context is mediated by spoken language. A number of researchers have given credence to sign language claiming that it is entirely capable of being used as a medium of instruction from birth to tertiary-level (Petitto 1994; Klima & Bellugi 1979; Stokoe 1974).

Further, linguistic evidence demonstrates that sign languages are fully-fledged languages entirely capable of expressing all the nuances of meaning that all spoken languages can express (Bellugi 1989; Petitto 1984; Aarons & Akach 1999: 8). Natural signed languages provide a perfect demonstration of the human capacity for language, as they have a linguistic structure quite as complex as any other human language. They have their own independent grammar and can be used for everything that spoken languages may be used for. Sign language has arisen and it is used by a community of users (Deaf community). Sign language is acquired at the same rate as other human languages and like other spoken languages are subject to change and systematic variation as a result of social factors (Storbeck & Morgans 2002; Aarons & Akach 1999; Petitto 1994; Bellugi 1980; Stokoe 1960). Exposure to sign language for individuals who are deaf can lead to much richer and earlier patterns of language interaction, less frustration and less isolation.

1.3.2 The Self-Efficacy Theory as defined by Albert Bandura

The Self-Efficacy theory as defined by Albert Bandura (1997) is "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations." While this concept can be related to pupils' academic performance; it is interesting to consider how self-efficacy can affect teachers' competence in the classroom as well. Most teachers believe that they do not have the ability to teach deaf children and these can affect their output. Woolfolk (2007) defines teacher efficiency as teacher's judgment of his or her capabilities to bring about the desired outcome of pupils' engagement and learning, even among those pupils who may be difficult. This is because believing in one's abilities powerfully affects behaviour, motivation and ultimately the people's success or failure. This theory is relevant to the study because it relates to the idea that most special education teachers confirm that they lack competence in signing hence they cannot adequately teach deaf pupils.

Cummins (1989) developed the 'Linguistic Interdependence Model. This model suggests that a "common underlying proficiency makes possible the transfer of cognitive/academic or literacy related skills across languages given adequate exposure in school and adequate motivation to learn a foreign language. According to the "Linguistic Interdependence Theory", a language user possesses an underlying set of cognitive and language abilities that are similar to the base of an iceberg. The surface features of a language are similar to the caps of an iceberg. Vicars (2003) posit that if a person knows two languages, it is like having two ice caps with a common underlying base, hence the reference to "double iceberg model".

From this perspective, it is clear that if an individual already has a language base it becomes easier to acquire a second language. Deaf learners acquiring a spoken language as a second language for reading and writing purposes, as sign language has no written form, they need to have exposure to the culture of the spoken language too. Deaf learners need to have exposure to English language and culture from both the deaf and hearing communities. Deaf learners need to be enculturated into the cultural/social world of both the deaf and the hearing community.

1.3.3 Empirical framework

Previous works from other researchers was used to support and improve on this work.

Olivier & Williams (2005) carried out a study on "teaching the mentally handicapped: challenges teachers are facing". The aim of the study was to explore and describe the experiences of teachers with regards to the major problems they face when teaching the mentally handicapped child, and to formulate guidelines for

teachers to effectively handle the difficult problems they face in meeting the needs of these children. The sample consisted of teachers of a special education school in South Africa. The descriptive, exploratory, and inductive design was used. Findings of the study revealed that special education is challenging by its very nature. That is, it is different from mainstream education in that there are children with different abilities in the same class, different cultural backgrounds and different languages making communication difficult for the teacher and also, the children are more difficult to discipline. They proposed that special education teachers need orientation on what would be expected of them and need support through in-service training from experts in the field and specialized training to overcome certain limitations in the basic training of teachers.

2. Methodology of data collection

To investigate the challenges faced by teachers in using ASL during instruction in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon, four deaf institutions served for data collection namely; Ephphatha institute for the deaf (EID) in Kumba, Buea school for the deaf (BSD), Morningstar deaf and hard of hearing school in Akum and Mbingo integrated school for the deaf- bamenda. These schools had pupils from classes 1 to 6. In this study the quantitative and qualitative descriptive survey (mixed method design) was employed with the help of observation checklist, interview guide and questionnaires as instruments for data collection. The descriptive survey is vital because it is concerned with conditions that exist, practices that prevail, processes that are on-going, effects that are being felt or trends that are developing. The population of the study consisted of 413 pupils and 30 teachers from all the four schools. The Questionnaire and interview guide were semi-structured to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data. The observation checklist was established to naturally witness the challenges faced by teachers when using ASL practically during classroom instructions. The self-delivery method was used with the researcher collecting data from all the schools. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics.

3. Findings

Findings from the data collected through questionnaires, interviews and observations in classrooms reveal that:

RQ1- Have the teachers acquired the necessary skills in ASL to best perform their functions in order to meet the needs of deaf pupils in Cameroon?

Out of the 30 teachers questioned, interviewed and observed 25 (83%) face difficulties in using ASL to effectively teach deaf pupils in the various classrooms as a result of inadequate training in signing. Teaching deaf children is a highly specialized art which requires adequate training and signing skills from teachers. Findings reveal that most teachers face challenges in the process of teaching deaf children because of their limited knowledge, skills and experience in ASL. Teachers of the deaf then have a responsibility to become fluent in sign language and gain an understanding of deaf culture.

RQ 2- Which other modes of communication did the teachers adapt during the teaching process?

27 (90%) out of 30 teachers use other medium of communication during instruction such as: Total communication, the bilingual method and manualism. Total Communication is known as 'simultaneous communication' as both sign and spoken languages are used together. This approach is often called Signed English, Signed Supported English or Signed Supported Speech. It needs to be noted that although signs are use in this method, the signs use follow the language structure of a spoken language. The bilingual mode of communication is also used. The bilingual approach involves the adaptation and use of six skills related to ASL and English literacy-oracy abilities such as: finger spelling (the sign language alphabet), writing, pictures, lip-reading, gestures and oral speech. It is considered bilingual because teachers use both ASL and English language, though rarely fluent in both. Since there is no written ASL form, pupils learn English for purposes of reading and writing. ASL is used as the language of instruction and English is learned through print. Manualism involves the use of sign language, space, sounds, using the upper body, hands and face. This approach includes activities such as signing, attending, finger spelling, lip reading, reading and writing, watching and listening.

It is clear that deaf learners have the right to be educated in the language of their choice (sign language) as well as belong to their linguistic minority group (deaf community) where they may enjoy their culture with other members of the deaf community. This should be done in a language they best master not adapted sign language. This study therefore suggests that teachers be empowered with signing skills in order to make learning possible and also to improvise by developing other communication techniques during instruction so as to improve on the overall quality of deaf education in Cameroon.

4. Discussion of findings

Discussion of findings deals with the presentation and analysis of data gathered on the field using the materials and method already described above. The details are organized in accordance with the objectives and research questions posed.

4.1. Research question 1: To verify if teachers have acquired ASL skills to best perform their functions in order to meet the needs of deaf pupils in Cameroon

Findings of this research show that Out of the 30 teachers questioned, interviewed and observed 25 (83%) face difficulties in using ASL to effectively teach deaf pupils in the various classrooms. In Cameroon deaf pupils experience a range of barriers to learning and participation in school. These barriers are located within the modes of communication, the learners, teachers, the centres of learning, the educational system, families and within the broader social, economic and political context. From interviews and observations during lessons, it is thought that these barriers are caused by the fact that teachers have not had the relevant training in ASL hence the barrier, inadequately and inappropriately trained education managers and educators. Teaching and learning is done in a language which is adapted (ASL). It leads to some linguistic difficulties which hinder the teaching and learning process. Deaf learners lag behind their hearing peers as they experience serious problems with their language skills, especially when it comes to reading, writing, and understanding of concepts and abstract vocabulary. Pupils receive limited amount of knowledge from their teachers who use longer time to communicate information via ASL. Some factors are responsible for this problem:

1. The overall training levels in ASL of teachers in special education centres are generally low. Training often tends to be inadequate, unequal and largely inappropriate to the existing needs. The move, however, demands that teachers develop a high level of signing skill in order to respond to deaf needs. It also demands that specialist teachers be trained to refocus their expertise into more advisory and consultative roles. Further training needs arise with respect to other professionals particularly parents.
2. There are currently no sign language competency/fluency assessment requirements for teachers wishing to educate deaf learners in schools for the deaf in Cameroon. This is one of the reasons for the low level of sign language competency among teachers of the deaf. In order for effective teaching and learning to occur, effective communication is paramount. For deaf learners, sign language instruction and the training of teachers, support staff and parents in sign language are essential to enhance communication and education. If teachers in schools for the deaf continue to educate their deaf learners using adapted ASL they will be creating severe barriers for deaf learners because their specific language needs are not addressed. Consequently deaf learners will not have equal access, equal opportunities and equal rights in their education. A Cameroonian sign language is therefore paramount.
3. Lack of parental involvement in pupils' learning is a visible barrier to their education. Most parents and other family members do not master deaf children's communication and therefore feel that they have nothing to contribute to the children's schooling process. This barrier has an impact on the learning capacity of the children since most of them cannot be assisted with school work at home.

4.2. Research question 2: *To verify if teachers adapt other modes of communication during the teaching process*

Findings from this study show that 27 (90%) out of 30 teachers use other medium of communication during instruction such as: Total communication, the bilingual method and manualism. Teachers have to adapt these modes in order to teach successfully. Due to these challenges most teachers feel inadequately prepared and equipped to teach deaf pupils. Being unable to express yourself and make your needs known is one of the most frustrating of human experience. Similarly, trying and failing to understand what someone else is struggling to convey can be extremely disheartening. Communication skills are clearly an important part of the teaching process that runs through all the subjects. The development of communication skills is highly relevant if one looks at organization since children cannot learn unless they and the teachers can communicate with each other. All aspects of living and learning involve communication. Children are held back by language barriers from getting to grasps the curriculum. For example, in mathematics, they are prevented from exploring several operations. Through sign language, a child should learn to receive communication using graphics adequately and appropriately for different purposes and topics. All aspects of living and learning involve communication and the teacher has to look for ways to foster this in the classroom.

4.3 Research question 3: *To propose solutions to ameliorate the problem of communication*

Education is the right of every Cameroonian child. Deaf pupils and their teachers need to be educated in pursuance of the National Policy of Education. For this to happen:

1. There should be a reform to give special training in sign language to primary school student-teachers.
2. Teachers have to adapt different communication modes during the teaching process in response to the needs of deaf learners in classrooms.
3. For effective implementation of deaf education, highly qualified and specialized teachers are needed. Training institutions must stay awake thus, all teacher training colleges and universities should include sign language as a subject in their curriculum so that the graduates are empowered with skills to teach pupils with special needs.
4. In-service training for teachers should be implemented in order to create a positive learning environment. It has become clear from the study that teachers need enough time to gain adequate knowledge in sign language.

5. CONCLUSION

The goal in this research is to identify the problems that teachers and deaf children face during classroom instruction in school in relation to ASL used as medium of instruction. From an overview of the study conducted in four deaf institutions in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon, it was discovered that teachers face difficulties using ASL as medium of instruction in teaching deaf pupils. Due to these difficulties, adaptations of different modes of communication seem to be problematic. As a result:

1. Special education teachers in deaf institutions have inadequate knowledge and professional training skills in American Sign Language (ASL) in Cameroon.
2. Children are less expose to aural activities. They miss a lot of information given to them through ASL because the language is only adapted and the teachers have inadequate signing skills.
3. In order for schools of the deaf to prevent barriers of inappropriate language of teaching and learning, special needs teachers should be trained in appropriate areas such as sign language and deaf culture to better

empower and equip them to teach appropriately and effectively while a Cameroonian sign language is developed. If the above mentioned barriers are prevented, then schools for the deaf will become better places for deaf education.

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