

EMPOWERING SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS FOR QUALITY SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATION FOR LEARNERS WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENT



OGUNWALE, O.R.

*School Of Special Education
Federal College Of Education Special Oyo
Mamat4zure@yahoo.com*



ABSTRACT

This paper examined empowerment of sign language interpreters for quality special needs education in Nigeria: Implication of the empowerment for learners with hearing impairment in Nigeria. Sign language interpreters compliment the work of a teacher in the classroom hence; there is need for empowerment to meet up with the universal minimum standard expected of them. This paper shed light on the duties of sign language interpreters in the classroom code of conduct and findings on problem experience by sign language interpreters who is not empowered. Educational implication of empowering sign language interpreters vividly discussed. Recommendations were given that sign language interpreters should be allowed to attend professional development programmes so as to improve learners with hearing impairment performance.

Keywords: *Empowerment, Sign Language Interpreters, Special Needs Education, Learners with Hearing Impairment.*

Introduction

Sign language interpreter is a person that serves as a facilitator of communication between students with hearing impairment and their teachers. Sign language interpreter gives supportive service to learners with hearing impairment so as to compliment the work of teachers in the classroom. In order to maintain the status and qualities of sign language interpreter there is need to empower the sign language interpreter. Empowerment of sign language interpreter is considered to be vital in the education of learners with hearing impairment. There is need to improve on the code of conduct of sign language interpreter to be able to meet up with universal minimum standard expected of them. A sign language interpreter must be passionate and highly skilled in the area of interpretation. It is appropriate that a sign language interpreter have appropriate qualification and professional experience. Also, recognized teaching qualification is vital in handling children with hearing impairment in the school. Sign

language is a visual means of communicating using gestures, facial expression and body language. It is used mainly by children who are deaf or those who have hearing loss. An Interpreter's role is strictly on communication to learners with hearing loss or deafness. Interpreters sign everything that is said and say everything that is signed. Sign language interpreters must abide by a set of ethical principles set forth by the national Registry of interpreters of the deaf. Their code of conduct protects and guides interpreter and children with deafness who needs their service.

In addition, an interpreter's primary function is to act as the facilitator of communication between students with hearing impairment and their inclusive teachers. The interpreter is included as a member of the supportive service providers. The interpreter is unique, in that the position is an extension of the student and the student's relationship with the student (Orange County, 2003), interpreting with students depend on the students' age, grade levels and experience, interpreters may need to remind them about homework, assist hearing students in accepting and understanding students with hearing impairment, functions as liaisons between the programme for the students with hearing impairment and the regular teachers, tutor students with hearing impairment and possibly hearing students in the class and so on. The orange country guidelines include the following among additional duties of interpreters; when not interpreting, interpreters may be called upon to tutor students with hearing impairment during class time under the direction of the regular teacher, interpreters will be available to interpret before or after-school tutoring sessions of the teacher and students with hearing impairment where possible, when not interpreting, interpreters may function as classroom aids, assisting the regular teacher as requested, interpreters may remind the regular teacher when a note-taker is needed for students with hearing impairment or communication and behaviour disorders and they should keep the (special resources) teacher informed of the progress of the students, as members of the educational team.

Findings of previous studies

Napier and Rohan (2007) conducted a survey research study in Australia on what makes an interpreter a good interpreter. The researchers sought the perspectives of deaf consumers at the basic level. Findings of the study revealed what deaf people expected of interpreters and what they understood from sign language interpreting. Results of the study indicated that the deaf respondents were overall satisfied with the work of interpreters. Understanding the context of the interpreted situation and a professional attitude came up as the most important qualities users expect from interpreters. The gap in Napier and Rohan (2007) study did not consider deaf students in tertiary educational institutions.

Verwey-Jonker (2003) conducted a study on the perceptions of deaf sign language users on the quality of Sign Language interpreting of the daily news on TV in the Netherlands. The study concentrated on the assessment by the deaf viewers on the interpreters, expectations of adult viewers on news broadcasts and how the deaf

thought the quality of interpretation could be improved. Results of the study disclosed differences in quality among individual interpreters. Respondents reported the following missing components when watching interpreters: knowledge of the deaf community and deaf culture, interpreting into Dutch Sign Language and handling of more complex situations. They identified the following main competences interpreters would need to have and which relate to all interpreting settings: adjusting signing style to the topics in the setting, extensive use of facial expressions and lip movements and learning new signs (training). The gap in Verwey-Jonker's study was that it was not conducted in an educational setting and also did not include students who depend on interpreters to access academic information.

Gran and Kellett (2000) suggested that educational interpreting is unlikely to provide deaf students with full access to academic instructions. The authors evaluated interpreters' skills in K-12 educational settings, using videotaped samples of expressive production of classroom content and receptive performance from a standardized interview with a deaf student. Assessments took into account factors such as students' grade levels and modes of communication. Gran and Kellett found that less than half of the 59 interpreters they evaluated performed at a level considered minimally acceptable for educational interpreting. They concluded that many deaf children are denied access to classroom communication because of the skills of their interpreters.

Hermans, Dijk and Christoffels (2007) conducted a study to compare the quality of new graduate interpreters of a bachelor program and more experienced interpreters in the Netherlands. Their findings revealed no difference in the quality between recently graduated interpreters and more experienced interpreters.

Wit and Sluis (2014) conducted a study on "Sign language interpreter quality: the perspective of deaf sign language users in the Netherlands". The deaf selected their interpreters based on individuals set criteria which include situational factors, the interpreters, professional skills and norms. Results of the study indicated that the deaf preferred an interpreter who will render a faithful and understandable interpretation. Also the results showed that the criteria varied depending on the setting, such as employment, education and community. Again, the study suggested that many deaf sign language users have inadequate awareness regarding the professional requirements of the interpreter and also many interpreters have inadequate insight regarding the expectations of the deaf sign language users. The work of Wit and Sluis (2014) showed that deaf students do not select their own interpreters. The interpreters are attached to courses and all that the deaf students need to do is to attend lectures and meet their assigned interpreters.

Abbou (1994) investigated challenges faced by deaf students and interpreters in the classroom. The author videotaped graduate level interpreted classes and described several situations in which even when interpreters understood the instructors' message, communications breakdowns occurred (for instance, difficulty

in situations in which lasses involved material that was unfamiliar to students and interpreters and those in which diagrams and ambiguous descriptions of visual partial scenes were involved). Beyond the issue of divided attention between visual materials and the interpreter, Abbou noted that communication via sign language requires visual-spatial detail not required in spoken communication.

Fobi and Oppong (2015) bridge the gap by finding out the perception of deaf students about the quality of sign language interpreting services provided in Nigerian institutions. Fobi and Oppong (2015) reported that presence of interpreters in the lecture hall enable students effectively get involved and actively participated in teaching and learning environment.

Ngobeni, Maimance, and Rankhumise, (2020) in their study investigated the effects of sign language barriers among deaf learners in special schools for the Deaf and Blind in the Motheo District in the Free State province of South Africa. It was found that learners acquired language at school rather than in the home environment, and a lack of physical resources were responsible for the learners' poor performance. Implication of this is that, sign language interpreters is very paramount in education of learners with hearing impairment. Therefore, lack of in-service training for empowerment of sign language interpreter can affect academic performance of learners with hearing impairment negatively. Learners with hearing impairment depend on visual cues for communication; they use their eyes as their ears, and their hands as their mouth hence, needs to empower skilled sign language interpreter.

Empowerment

Empowerment is an authority or power given to someone to do something. Being an empowered sign language interpreters means having freedom to provide learners with hearing impairment the type of support services they need. When sign language interpreters are empowered in the school, their confidence and job satisfaction will increase. This can help with overall retention of sign language interpreters that will lead to more innovation in the classroom and overall improvement in the school or college. Empowerment can also be described as a process whereby sign language interpreters develop the competence to take charge of their own growth and resolve their own problems. Sign language interpreters believe they have the skills and knowledge to act in a situation and improve it. Mhlong (2001) reported that empowerment means getting involved, taking initiative toward self empowerment, understanding educational changes which become an effective change agent and helping others towards implementing change. Sign language interpreters' empowerment is a multi-dimensional construct that is used to define new roles for a sign language interpreter. It also involves understanding code of conduct and ethics of sign language interpreters and implementing them accordingly. The implication is that the sign language interpreters has to be exposed to ongoing capacity building programme by way of attending relevant courses and taking initiative for self

empowerment. Adequate professional training is necessary for the empowerment of sign language interpreters.

Factors that Enhances Sign Language Interpreters Empowerment

To increase the output of sign language interpreters, the following needs to be considered:

1. Schools should always admit learners with hearing impairment who are actually having Intelligent Quotient (IQ) for academics not forcing all students with hearing impairment to attend school; in a nutshell admission should be a thorough process.
2. All academic staff should see a sign language interpreter as a colleague not second class citizen in school.
3. Learners with hearing impairment should be serious in academic for the work of a sign language interpreter to be appreciated.
4. Numbers of admitted candidate should correspond with number of sign language interpreter so as to enable sign language interpreter's effective delivery of their duty.
5. Empowerment of sign language interpreters is necessary and motivation for adequate training and retraining. There is long and short term training programme required for every worker. This will encourage staff professional development from time to time, in order to acquaint themselves with the changes that is taking place.

Educational Implication of Empowerment of Sign Language Interpreters

The followings are educational implication of empowerment of a sign language interpreters:

1. Job satisfaction and commitment on the part of sign language interpreters.
2. Quality performance and high productivity which enhances quality assurance in learners with hearing impairment.
3. It promotes academic achievement of learners with hearing impairment who are ready to cooperate with the interpreters.
4. There will be stability in number of sign language interpreters.
5. It makes sign language interpreters to retain their job.

Barrier to Sign Language Interpreters Empowerment

1. Parental negative attitude.
2. Laziness of some sign language interpreters.
3. Communication breakdown: lack of communication between academic staff and the sign language interpreters.
4. Unexplained duty of sign language interpreters.
5. Lackadaisical attitude of staff with hearing impairment.

6. Power tossil between academic staff, administrative staff and sign language interpreters.
7. Low morale of sign language interpreters.
8. Professionalization of sign language interpreting.
9. Women interpreters suffer a lot, meeting with home demand, pressure from academic staff, change in timetable without prior notification etc.
10. Inadequate provision of information on what to be interpreted prior to the time of interpreting.

There are rules and regulations in interpretation but a lot of people are not aware of it, even the special educators. Many sign language interpreters lack offices, furniture on their own. Lightning of offices, classroom are not adequate and many are not aware of dressing code (i.e. the sign language interpreters should never wear flashy colors or jewelry or dress provocatively; clothing to contrast skin tone is recommended).

Characteristics and Attributes Expected of a Sign Language Interpreters

1. Sign language interpreters understand the demands and his responsibilities in his place of work. He or she should be familiar with the course content that will be discussed.
2. Interpreters serve as intermediary between students with hearing impairment and their teacher. He or she interprets between students with hearing impairment and their peers, in the clinics, library, administration blocks and any where communication happen between deaf and anyone in the school.
3. Sign language interpreters should show respect to students with hearing impairment and teaching staff because their feeling should not be toil with. Effective sign language interpreter should give due regards to the right of students with hearing impairment, wishes, feelings but there should be limitation because many learners with hearing impairment take it for granted.
4. Sign language interpreters should be able to accommodate unforeseen circumstances such as timetable changes, canceled classes.
5. Sign language interpreters should be able to be adaptable to teaching styles of any teacher and learning styles of learners with hearing impairment.
6. Sign language interpreters should be committed to improve performance of their work, take responsibility for the outcome of the performance and be ready to take corrections for better development.
7. Sign language interpreters must have passion for his work not minding the side talks.
8. Sign language interpreters should actively prepare for the tasks of interpreting because of the stress and burn out of the work.
9. Sign language interpreters should always provide evidence of continuing work practice and professional development revalidation.

To buttress the points mentioned above, Wit and Sluis (2014), reported that interpreters should possess the following qualities:

1. He or she should interpret faithfully (100% of what is said is interpreted).
2. He or she should interpret clearly and understandably or fluently clear signing.
3. He or she should have a professional attitude.
4. He or she should be able to interpret into spoken language (voicing).
5. He or she should have linguistic variety or non-manual markers correctly.
6. He or she should ensure that there is no miscommunication.
7. He or she must continue their professional development.
8. He or she must be able to keep confidentiality.
9. He or she should be able to evaluate if students with hearing impairment is progressive in learning.
10. He or she must be flexible.
11. He or she must prepare him or herself for the assignment ahead.
12. He or she must be familiar with the related terminologies and context.
13. He or she should be involved with the deaf community.
14. From the above mentioned qualities, the researcher concluded that in some instance, in Nigeria context or school settings, teachers or speakers rarely inform or send manuscripts ahead of lectures to the sign language interpreter on the terminologies and contexts to be interpreted.

Consideration for Effective Interpreting in the Classroom

The following should be considered before interpreting commences:

1. Before event started, whenever possible, teacher should share note, outline, handout and uncaptioned movies with the interpreters in advance. Other specialized terminologies and acronyms should also be included.
2. Position of sign language interpreters should near the speakers. Provision of seating arrangement for the learners with hearing impairment should be nearer or with a clear line of sight to the interpreters.
3. Provision of appropriate lightning for the interpreters at all times is necessary.
4. Interpreters should be treated as professionals they are not personal assistants to learners with hearing impairment. They should only be asked to facilitate communication.
5. When communicating, the speaker should look and speak directly to the learners with hearing impairment.
6. Permit only one person to speak at a time during group discussions.

Conclusion

Empowering sign language interpreters through staff development programme like training, workshops, conferences and seminars should be emphasized to meet up with the current changes in the field of education for learners with hearing impairment.

Sign language interpreters can be truly empowered, effort should be made to improve schools where interpreters work and cadre which can encourage them to retain their job as a qualified sign language interpreter. Sign language interpreters compliment the work of a teacher in the classroom because without their involvement in the teaching and learning, learning will not take place for learners with hearing impairment. Empowerment of sign language interpreters is vital. Staff development training programme for sign language interpreters is also important to meet up with the current changes in the field of education for learners with hearing impairment.

Recommendations

Based on this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Sign language interpreters should be allowed to attend professional development programmes.
2. Schools or colleges should celebrate sign language interpreters in the community and give them an opportunity to share what is working by sharing the success and creativity they have.
3. There is need to evaluate sign language interpreters workload per day because ideal work load per day should not be more than four hours.
4. Students to sign language interpreters' ratio should not be more than ratio 10:1 for effective interpreting.
5. Cooperation between the deaf community and sign language interpreters is very paramount.

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