

Strategies for Teaching Sign Language to In-School Children with Hearing Impairment in Nigeria

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Abstract

Children with hearing impairment have developed visual language that unites them together to form their communities and culture all around the world. This visual language is sign language and it has its symbols in which conventional nature of language is established. This sign language gives to deaf children what spoken language gives to hearing children. This paper highlights the concept of language and language learning, and the importance of language to deaf and hard of hearing children. The paper also discusses deaf and hard of hearing children, the process of identifying them, as well as the effect of deafness on a child's development. More so, the importance of early learning of sign language are explained and some of the strategies for teaching sign language to deaf and hard of hearing children are spelt out, including demonstration and dramatization, use of pictures of various colours and sizes to add interest and convey meaning, among others. The paper recommends that parents, siblings and teachers should learn sign language as early as possible, as this will help them to effectively teach sign language to their deaf and hard of hearing children.

Keywords: strategies, sign language, children, hearing impairment, visual language.

Introduction

Hearing is a vital sense for language learning and language development, communication, social integration and academic success in children. It facilitates the ability to receive, process and understand auditory information, particularly in educational settings where verbal interaction is central to teaching and learning. The universal trait among all members of deaf community is inability to hear spoken language, but deafness binds the community together. This togetherness facilitates deaf people to seek each other out for social and emotional support through common language. This language is sign language, which helps in the sharing of experiences and thoughts and determines the existence of the deaf culture and identity. However, children with hearing impairment are born; and they start communicating with the world around them. The vital connection between parents, family members, teachers and the children with hearing impairment depends on this communication.

Children with hearing impairment use extensive body language, facial expression, and all sorts of verbal sound to interact with parents and siblings. These movement and sounds will eventually evolve into language. Children with hearing impairment are born with abundant intelligence, but they have a limited means to explain their thoughts and needs. Children with hearing impairment are those children who could not hear and as a result, could not develop and use speech for communication (Kirk & Gallagher, 2006). Hearing impairment can be

defined as hearing defect that interferes with the processing of linguistic information through hearing. Hearing impairment mean a deviation or change for the worse in either auditory structure or auditory function, usually outside the range of normal. According to Abang (2005), children with hearing impairment are those children with slight hearing loss, mild hearing loss, moderate hearing loss and severe hearing loss. Ozoji (2005) stated that hearing impairment are those children in whom the sense of hearing is defective and this could range from ability to hear partially to total deafness. For educational purpose, the deaf are those who cannot process linguistics information through audition with or without hearing aid. The hearing and non-hearing persons have nothing visibly to distinguish them from each other except matters of hearing and speaking. It is therefore a common occurrence to take non-hearing persons for hearing ones and harshly penalize them when they fail to respond accurately to verbal requests or instructions.

Sign language is one of the systems mostly used in interactive communication with or by persons who experience difficulties in oral communication. Sign language is a visual-gestural language which involves the use of hands, eyes, mouth, mimic, and body movement (World Federation of the Deaf, 2015). A manual alphabet (finger spelling) may also be used alongside sign language. Like many oral languages, sign language has a linguistic structure, which can be learnt through interaction with people with hearing impairment and other people who know it. Sign language is a system whereby signs are used to represent particular letters, words, ideas, value and concepts. The system does not involve the use of hands alone but the use of the whole body to represent and describe idea and concept (Sokale, 2009). For instance, a growing child with hearing impairment lacks some components which serve as fundamental for effective learning. For instance, Warts, et al. (2007) aver that hearing impairment makes a child not to establish a link between what he/she sees and hears, due to lack of hearing and speech for communication. Rose (2001) and Ademokoya (2016) noted that their usage of speech skills to communicate is lacking. Lewis (2007) observed that school children with hearing impairment experience difficulties in spoken language, which erodes their self-esteem, destroys their achievement, decreases their motivation and limit their academic achievement. This condition can be ameliorated if appropriate measures are employed. Similarly, at the point of entering into school at the age of 6 years, children with hearing impairment can command a vocabulary of 50 to 500 words against the expected 2,500 to 3,000 words, and many may not even have any vocabulary (Ademokoya, 2016).

Concept of language

Language can be defined as the use of arbitrary vocal symbols in communication by people within a given environment. Human language is unique because it is acquired through learning rather than biological inheritance. It is an arbitrary symbol because it is made up of signs and sounds which have meanings given to them arbitrarily by its users. Anwan (2001) agreed that language can be seen as a system of symbols used for the purpose of communication. Usage of language enriches the individual and enable him/her to take active part in the community and its activities. To deprive a man of such participation amounts to depriving him of his identity. Without overstressing the obvious, the above definitions and explanation have not in any way sidelined sign language as a means of communication that can be learnt. Language is seen as a system of words or signs that people use to express thoughts and feelings to one another. Language is a unique vehicle for thought and expression. According to Dougherty (1999),

language is a set of symbols used by people to send and receive messages. These symbols may consist of words, facial or hand expressions, or even smoke signals. Speaking, reading, writing, gesturing, listening, watching, and understanding are all parts of language.

Language and communication

All the languages of the world are organized by rules that govern the use of their symbols. Communication is one of the highest forms of social interaction. Babudoh (2021) describes communication as the imparting or exchanging of information by speaking, writing and other forms of interactions between two or more people. Every communication involves a sender, a message and at least a recipient. This is the communication model. There are four main types of communication, namely verbal (as in speaking), non-verbal (as in sign language, facial expression and body movements), writing, (writing, typing) and visual communication (as in photographs, art, drawing, sketch, charts and graphs). Communication is the process of sharing information, and involves many communicative functions, such as seeking, social interaction, requesting objects, sharing of ideas, and rejecting an object or interaction. It requires sending message in understandable form (encoding) and receiving and understanding message (decoding). It always involves a sender and a receiver of the message, but it does not always involve oral language. Communication can also be nonverbal; in fact, much of the meaningful interaction among humans occurs nonverbally (Owens et al., 2007). Language (both verbal and nonverbal) and speech are important tools for human communication.

Language learning

Learning language is the single greatest challenge for children with hearing impairment. Unlike their peers with normal hearing, children with hearing impairment acquire language largely through their eyes. This is because the auditory information that they might be able to receive is incomplete and often distorted. Individual with hearing impairment typically communicate in one of the three ways: oral/aural, American Sign Language, simultaneous communication or local sign language.

Oral/aural communication is communication in spoken English through the use of speech, speech reading, residual hearing, and amplification of sound (Turnbull et al., 2004). American Sign Language (ASL) is a visual-gestural language, requiring the use of eyes and hands. ASL has a rule structure that is distinct from other languages, including English. In ASL, the shape, location, orientation, and movement of a signer's hands, the intensity of the signer's motions, the signer's facial expression, and body movement all communicate meaning. Because of the different rules and structure for each language, it is not possible to sign ASL and speak English at the same time (Riekehof, 2006). Finger spelling is generally used for spelling words and proper name that have no known sign. When finger spelling, the signer uses the manual alphabet to spell words letter by letter (Turnbull et al., 2004).

Local Sign language (LSL) is another signed system developed and used by children with hearing impairment and the hearing peers in their localities. Local sign language (LSL) is a system of communication developed and used within a country. According to Abang (2005) in Easkay and Ugwuanyi (2012), local sign language is built on the gesture, custom and language spoken in a particular area. Local sign language represents exactly the objects and events they are referring to. According to Riekehof (2006), sign language is a language which uses manual

symbols to represent idea and concepts. The term “sign language” is usually applied to describe the language used by deaf people in which both manual codes and finger is employed. Manual alphabet is the 26 different single hand positions representing the 26 letters of the alphabet.

Importance of early language learning to in-school children with hearing impairment

Language is of central importance in child development and/or their success in school and in the society at large. Children's education and development in the area of language is very important because of its importance in all areas of life, including getting along as a member of a family, making friends, fitting in and succeeding at school, and the ability to participate in the wider world of work and leisure. According to Harris (1990), language is the key to all other treasure stores for the deaf child. Language is of supreme importance because:

1. It enables him to establish relationships with his parents, other children, teachers, people around him/her.
2. It is the means by which all other subjects, speech, auditory training, lip reading, writing, among others can effectively be taught.
3. The deaf child needs language for communication, learning, self-expression, broadening of ideas, socialization and understanding of the world.
4. Language facilitates study of other subjects.
5. Language enables the deaf child to participate in the day-to-day activities of the people in his/her environment.
6. Language develops the child's mind and enables him to associate ideas more freely and effectively.
7. Language is, and should be, used when there is good reason for using it. It must be a means of giving expression of the user's thoughts, ideas, needs, desires, hopes, imaginations, joy and perplexities.

A deaf child is considered very fortunate if he has parents who are skilled in the use of language, who have excellent vocabulary and who read to their children (Moji, 1997).

Children with hearing impairment

Deaf person is one who cannot process linguistic information through audition with or without hearing aids. Children with hearing impairment have hearing disability so severe that they have little useful hearing even if they use hearing aid. It is noted that even though all persons who are deaf perceive some sound, they cannot use hearing as their primary way to gain information. The deaf are persons whose auditory channel is sufficiently damaged, rendering the person's sense of hearing non-functional, with or without hearing aid, for the ordinary purposes of life. However, Bila (2007) defines deaf as a word in its generic sense to include all children/youths whose hearing impairment is sufficiently severe to prevent full benefit from ordinary conversational activities. Therefore, it includes those identified as hard-of-hearing and general hearing-impaired persons. Pre-lingual deafness is presented at birth or occurs before the child has learned language. While, post lingual deafness occurs after the child has developed language. This classification is based on the point of language acquisition.

How to detect deafness in children

Several crude measures are available to parents and siblings to detect a hearing loss in their children. Children without hearing problems should startle at the sound of a loud clap three to

six inches away, at birth to three months; stop moving or crying when called or when exposed to an unfamiliar sound, at three to six months; turn towards the sound of a voice calling from beyond the field of vision, at nine to twelve months and talk in short phrases at two years (Bakare, 2013). While in adults, some clues to possible hearing loss are:

1. Trouble following conversation in a crowded room.
2. The need to turn the television or radio so loud, such that it is uncomfortable to others.
3. Think people around you are mumbling.
4. The need to frequently ask things to be repeated.
5. Inability to understand someone unless you are facing them (Bakare, 2013).

Effect of hearing impairment on the child's development

It is well recognized that hearing impairment is critical to speech and language development, communication and learning. Children with listening difficulties due to hearing impairment or auditory processing disorder are not identified and are receiving less attention than they require. The earlier the hearing loss occurs on the child life, the more serious the effects on the child development. Similarly, the earlier the problem is identified and intervention begun, the less serious the ultimate impact. Some effects of hearing impairment on child's development are:

1. Delay in language development: Development of language and communication skills is a critical stage of a child's development, and it is important for children to be able to communicate with others and understand the world around them. Children with hearing loss may have delayed language development because they cannot hear and processes the same range of sounds as children with normal hearing. This can lead to difficulties in understanding spoken language, as well as in developing expressive language skills. It can also lead to difficulties with social interaction and emotional development (Anna et al., 2020).

2. Communication difficulties: Children with hearing loss may experience difficulty with hearing and communication, which can lead to other social and emotional challenges. For instance, they may have trouble following directions, understanding and using language, and interacting with others. This can lead to frustration and negative social interactions such as bullying. They may also have difficulty forming relationships. Additionally, they may have a higher risk of developing social anxiety and low self-esteem. Children with hearing impairment who have communication difficulties may also experience difficulty in school. For example, they may have trouble following the teacher's instruction and participating in classroom discussions. They may also have difficulty understanding and using academic language, such as vocabulary and technical terms. As a result, they may fall behind in their academic performance and have lower achievement level than their peers. Additionally, they may have a higher risk of dropping out of school and lower rates of completing higher education.

3. Delay in receptive and expressive communication skills: Deafness causes delay in the development of receptive and expressive communication skills (speech and language). Receptive here means the ability for the person to comprehend what is being said. While the expressive is the ability for the person to express himself through speech and language; but the effect of hearing loss on the development of speech and language depends on a number of variables including, age at onset, age at discovery, and age at interventions.

4. Communication gap: Hearing impairment may create communication gap, hindering free-flow of interaction between the individuals with hearing impairment and their counterparts. Misunderstanding of one's action and verbal expression may develop from

difficulty in talking things over and refusal to talk to the individual simply because he/she is disabled. The non-disabled generally do not want to interact with or be associated with a disabled person.

5. It may have an impact on vocational choices: There are certain jobs they cannot hold. These includes sales jobs or job as receptionists, military and paramilitary profession, among others. Many of them are even denied admission to read courses of their choice in higher institutions of learning in Nigeria (Abang, 1992).

6. Social and emotional impact: Children with hearing loss may face challenges in social situations, as they struggle to communicate and engage with others effectively. This can lead to feelings of isolation, frustration, and low self-esteem. They may also experience difficulties in making friends and participating in group activities (John & Sylon, 2013).

7. Segregation/isolation/social withdrawal from the mainstream of the society: The society tend to discriminate against the disabled, isolate them in all spheres of life from the manifold of the social life, and thus may be segregated from the non-disabled as if they are outcasts or abominable beings. The individual with disability on his part, because they perceive himself and his ability negatively, may tend to isolate himself from what is happening around him.

8. Underachievement: Due to long period of confusion by parents on what to do, or in searching for cure that is not easy to come by, or due to the psychological and mental problems that may develop from disability, may cause him not to achieve or to achieve below average expected of his age. This should not be misunderstood to mean that all individuals with disabilities do not achieve. Many, through struggle (self-effort, determination of purpose and the untiring zeals of their parents) do make their mark in all spheres of life.

Strategies for teaching sign language to in-school children with hearing impairment

There should be an establishment of common language as a basis for all inter-communications between pupils and their teachers, and between pupils themselves. There should be regular communication between pupils and teachers, and between pupils themselves. Ideas, should be presented as accurately and as naturally as possible, employing as many different techniques as possible to include dramatization and demonstration (Moji, 1997). Some general hint on language teaching include:

1. Careful ordering of language elements is essential, employing both the analytical and natural approaches. Any tendency to generalized response by using a particular pattern in various forms and situation should be avoided.
2. Pictures of various colours and sizes should be used to add interest and convey meaning.
3. Teacher should know something about various methods of teaching/learning and all aspects of language including the grammatical approaches, linguistic and psycholinguistics.
4. Vocabulary teaching should utilize or employ any or all of these techniques:
 - a. Use objects and pictures to illustrate words.
 - b. Dramatize or demonstrate the meaning of the words. For example, jump, dance, cry, eat, drink.
 - c. Explain words and give examples of their uses.
 - d. Provide children with the opportunities to use the words.
 - e. Use words in lip reading, speech, fingerspelling, reading and writing.
 - f. Teach meaning of words one at a time.

g. Vocabulary should consist of words which children use to express themselves at their age level and relate to practical situation.

h. Teacher should teach words usage and word meaning progressing from simple word to the more difficult words.

Conclusion

The need for human beings to communicate is one of the most basic needs. Children with hearing impairment cannot meet the pace required for oral speech; therefore, there is the need for implementation in their means of communication. Teaching language to deaf and hard of hearing children has increased over the years, and this is necessary in order to prepare the deaf and hard of hearing children to take his/her place in the society. However, the deaf child must be trained in all areas of living and must be given the opportunity to function in his/her greatest capacity.

Recommendations

1. Parents, siblings and teachers should learn sign language as early as possible, as this will help them to effectively teach sign language to their deaf and hard of hearing children.

2. Government should put sign language as a teaching subject in the curriculum of primary and secondary schools across the country.

3. Government and NGOs, both national and international, should provide capacity building training workshop for teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing children.

4. Awareness campaign should be provided to parents of the deaf and hard of hearing children, through media such as radio, television, regarding the importance of learning sign language.

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