

**PRACTICE AND PREFERENCES OF SIGN LANGUAGES  
IN THE INSTRUCTION OF DEAF STUDENTS:  
SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE MAINSTREAM  
SECONDARY SCHOOLS OF BOTSWANA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The use of language for every day communication has been and continues to be an essential element of any teaching and learning environment. In this paper, the focus is on the teaching –learning communication in the education of the learners with deafness. While experiences indicate that some people in Botswana are showing more and more interest in Sign Language as a mode of instruction in the classroom, it is also true that many are far from understanding the “Deaf Culture” and to use sign language in the teaching and learning of deaf students. To a great extent, deaf people in Botswana are still disadvantaged and discriminated against, by their condition. A survey carried out in 2004 (1) revealed that some current practices in the mainstream secondary school of Botswana make it difficult for deaf students to progress. While, for example, participants preferred Total Communication; in practise, Signed English is used. Thus, this paper takes a stance that if practices conflict with preference, low performance should be expected. This is currently the situation at the mainstream secondary schools in Botswana, deaf students’ inability to hear has become their inability to learn and progress in education. This could be avoided. In this 21<sup>st</sup> century, being unable to hear is not a barrier to learning, as we are aware that Sign Languages are there as full languages, for the education of deaf.*

**INTRODUCTION**

This paper came as a result of the encounter with deaf students during a teaching practice exercise. Teaching practice is a concept used at the University of Botswana (UB) to refer

to a period where University Lecturers (supervisors) are engaged in a supervisory, monitoring and assessment of teaching by their students across the entire country. UB students are placed in different secondary schools to do the teaching practice. As supervisors, the authors had the opportunity of doing some observations in these schools. Some of the schools visited, had deaf students. These schools employ a system of integration. That is, schools enroll both deaf and “normal” hearing students. Deaf learners are placed in segregated classes. That is ‘deaf students’ are taught in their own classrooms.

During the time the authors visited these schools, the problems observed for deaf learners included the dearth of literature on sign languages and lack of assistive technologies. On talking with teachers of these deaf students, many more problems were cited. For example, the use of sign language as the language of instruction /teaching of the deaf in the main stream secondary schools of Botswana seem to pose some problems too. Despite the seriousness of a number of problems, what caught the attention of the authors were the communication issues and the language of instruction used with these students. The initial conversation with teachers of deaf students revealed, that there was generally poor performance by deaf learners and this could be attributed to languages used by teachers to communicate with (teach) them. To unearth a true picture of these communication problems a number of data collection techniques were employed, namely, informal interactions, unstructured interviews (informal conversation), semi-structured interviews and some observations. It was believed that problems of teaching the deaf learners can be unearthed and understood when data collection techniques are triangulated.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

Historically, educating children with hearing impairment in Botswana started around 1970, by some Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). In those early years, the Government of Botswana showed very little interest in educating children with exceptionality because this was not considered a ‘sound investment of resources’ (2). However, as education reforms came by and the need for open access and equity was emphasised, the Government declared interest in the education of the population in Botswana, deaf people included. In 1994, a document that brought hope for all i.e. the National Policy On Education, was produced. Its approval by the National Assembly on 7<sup>th</sup> April 1994, was a sign that Botswana is indeed

committed to embracing the sentiments of the 'right to education' (Education for All), including education of children with disability (3). Since the implementation of this policy, the situation has been steadily changing, although the pace of interest as reflected in policy formulation and implementation is very slow and worrying.

There is also a paucity of research in the area of the "Language of the Deaf". This should be expected because as already mentioned; sign languages are still relatively new in the culture of secondary schools of Botswana and this may have attracted very few researchers and scholars.

However, one positive move has been a shift from the traditional medical model which viewed individuals with hearing disability as problem, to a more comprehensive social model which considers them unique with different needs, from those of normal people. From the social perspectives, the deaf people are people who have a language that is different from languages of other people. They have an alternative to verbal language and that is their preferred sign language. This language is not yet common in Botswana. One laments the fact that the impact of early years when deaf people were considered a problem still lingers on in Botswana. There is, for example, a minority community commonly referred to as "Deaf Community." Like all minority communities in Botswana, this community is disadvantaged. For example, their language is not made popular in the mainstream secondary schools where some deaf students attend. The authors believe that if the language of the deaf (sign language) is known by some students who are not deaf, this will create an enabling climate that is appreciated by the deaf learners themselves and this can be extremely gratifying for these learners. Policy climate should be formulated to ensure that the language of the deaf is also recognised as a potent language of communication and classroom instruction. Deaf learners need language to socialise and communicate effectively, both inside and outside the classroom. It is crucial that their language be developed and used in school, as tool for enhancing their success.

## **METHOD**

### **Research design**

The project started as an informal discussion between the two researchers discussing the challenges and problems encountered during supervision of teaching practice by the University

of Botswana students. The discussion focused on teaching-learning experiences of the deaf. Problems of the use of (Sign Language) as a potent language of instruction for these learners were cited. An agreement was then reached to engage in a study that explores these problems. The findings of this study are reported in this paper.

### **The Qualitative nature of this project**

Two important principles of the qualitative approach guided this project, namely, the principle of inductive approach and principle of holism. Qualitative researchers use the “principle of inductive approach to indicate that meaning is embedded in people’s experience” (4). Thus, in designing this project, we recognized that teachers’ experiences matter. These were teachers who were involved in the teaching of deaf students. The authors then engaged in some informal conversation with these “rich cases”, the teachers, about their experience of teaching deaf learners in the mainstream school systems. Among other things, they talked about the challenges and problems of using different types of sign languages in their own context. The principle of inductive approach affirmed that it was only through an exploration of these teachers’ experiences that researchers could make sense of challenges or problems of using a sign language as a language of instruction. The principle of inductive approach states that understanding of the world begins with the experiences of individuals (5, 6).

The other principle, the principle of holism, reminds qualitative researchers to consider the influence of the practical contexts during the exploration (7). The practical context in this case was the mainstream secondary schools of Botswana with deaf students. This is also a context with lack of resources for deaf students and little interest on the part of other students in language of the deaf. The researchers needed to understand this specific context prior to engaging in research. It was for this reason that the researchers visited the schools to do some observations. Through some observations, it was possible to understand these “natural settings” (secondary schools) and how they may have an impact in the teaching and learning of deaf learners.

### **Participants**

Only teachers who were directly involved in the teaching and learning of the deaf learners participated. Table 1 indicates the pool of these participants. The actual numbers of participants

was arrived at using purposive sampling. Maxwell (8) defines purposive sampling as a “strategy in which particular settings, persons or events are selected deliberately.” Following this strategy, two institutions, namely Ramotswa Community Junior Secondary School and Thashatha Community Junior Secondary School were selected as the study sites.

**Table 1. Educational Options for students with Hearing Impairment in Botswana**

<b>Name of the School</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Facilities</b>
Ramotswa Centre for Deaf Education	Primary	Special	Residential
Fransistown Centre for Deaf Education	Primary	Special	Residential
Makolojwane Primary School, Serowe	Primary	Special Unit in Mainstream School	Day
Boyei Primary School, Maun	Primary	Special Unit in Mainstream School	Day
Ramotswa CJSS	Secondary	Special Unit in Mainstream School	Residential
Tashatha CJSS. Francistown	Secondary	Special Unit in Mainstream School	Residential
Maun Senior Secondary School, Maun	Sr. Secondary	Special Unit in Mainstream School	Residential

Ramotswa CJSS is in the South East district hence the closest to researchers’ place of work and residents, Gaborone. Moreover, it is the only secondary school for students with Hearing Impairment and Deafness in the Southern Region. The other site was Tashatha CJSS.

It was chosen because of its convenience, in terms of being the only secondary school for students with Hearing Impairment and Deafness in the Northern Region.

The people selected, were experienced in usage of the language for the hard-of-the-hearing, and they were willing to share their experiences. Participation was solicited through some informal discussion. For example, when a conversation was started and the individual showed interest, that individual was directly asked to participate in the study. Blending the conversation with what happened during the teaching-learning session practice was obviously the best strategy to capture respondents' interests and participation.

The timing of the informal conversation with potential respondents was very important. The researcher approached them while the experience was still fresh, that is, immediately after the lesson. These people were information-rich cases, explained by Patton (9) as cases "from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research." Patton states that if, "one wants to discover, understand, gain insight; [then] one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most" (9). Thus, the researchers believed that they could get the most or valuable information from teachers who facilitated in classes with deaf learners. Hence, the criteria for selecting this sample were as follows; (i) direct involvement in the teaching and learning of the deaf, (ii) one or more years of experiences in the teaching and learning of the deaf learners (iii) be in a Government/ Government aided school. Five teachers from each school, a total of 10 teachers who met these requirements participated.

### **Research questions**

The main question was:

What language is currently used in the teaching of deaf learners?

Some sub-questions were also asked. These were meant to investigate the following:

- (i) Qualifications of teachers of the deaf
  - a. Do teachers of deaf learners have relevant training and experiences in teaching these children?
- (ii) Preferred language of instruction and communication
  - a. Are languages of instruction in compliance with the languages preferred by the deaf learners and other teachers?

The focus was more on how to teach deaf students in a manner that they would realise their potentials to learn. The scope of this research did not allow researchers to address all questions associated with the teaching of deaf learners in the mainstream secondary schools of Botswana.

### **Data collection techniques**

The following data collection techniques were used

#### **(i) Semi-structured questionnaire**

A 15 itemed semi-structured questionnaire consisting of forced choice and open ended questions was used. The questionnaire was developed to gather information on the languages used in the classrooms for teaching deaf learners; language preferred by the teachers, problems faced by the teachers of the deaf learners and how some of these problems can be tackled. The questionnaire was also used for collecting the demographic information of the participants.

#### **(ii) Informal Interview**

Informal interviews were also used. Whenever an opportunity arose for researchers to have some conversation with the teachers of the deaf, the researcher seized it. The discussion mainly focused on the language used for instructing students who are deaf and the challenges of using Signed English or American Sign Language for the deaf. Teachers were also asked to suggest how the present situation that disadvantaged deaf students should be resolved. This will be reflected in the conclusions and recommendations. The goal was to generate as many ideas as possible, about the problem and challenges of using the language preferred by both deaf learners and their teachers. The informal conversation was carried out with ten teachers of the deaf.

Overall, informal conversations of the researchers allowed teachers of deaf students to talk freely about their feelings regarding the use of sign languages in teaching. The interviewers' probing kept the conversation to the point. Respondents' comments were recorded on a reflective Journal.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The discussion is organised around themes that emerged during data analysis. The data was fed into Microsoft Excel. Frequency counts and percentages were computed for the demographic analysis and displayed in graphical patterns. The transcribed responses of the participants were clustered and researchers came up with the themes and sub-themes.

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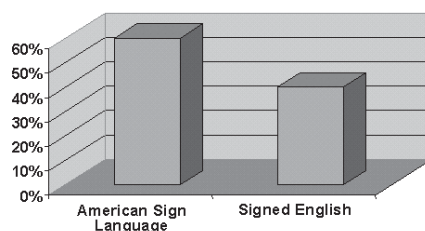
### Personal and professional background of the participants

To teach deaf students, it requires trained teachers. Moreover, teachers have to display a level of interest and enthusiasm to sustain them in this area. Thus, a question “what are the qualifications and experiences of deaf teachers.” It was necessary that the researcher should know the teachers’ qualifications, because qualifications play a major role in determining whether a person is the right professional for teaching learners with hearing impairment. The majority of participants eight (teachers of deaf learners) have obtained their degree at the University of Botswana. They had done a Bachelor of Special Education with a specialisation in the area of Hearing Impairment. There were a small number of teachers (10) who had attained their Diploma. Two had more than 10 years of experience in teaching students with hearing impairment. Four teachers had 2-5 years of experience and two others had 1-2 years of experience in teaching the students with hearing impairment. As can be seen, all teachers who participated, had significant experiences; they were information rich cases. They were able to share their experiences with the researchers. There were ten teachers, six females and four males. Their distribution was as follows; 5 came from Francistown (2 male, 3 Female) and the other five were from Ramotswa (2 Male 3 Female). Perhaps the ratio of more female than men was expected, as the trends in Botswana has always been that schools are staffed with more female than male teachers.

### Language(s) of instruction used in the schools

The second theme that emerged was that of the language of instruction. Researchers were interested in knowing the current languages used for communication with deaf learners during the teaching-learning activities. Two main languages were cited as indicated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Language Instruction used in the Classroom**



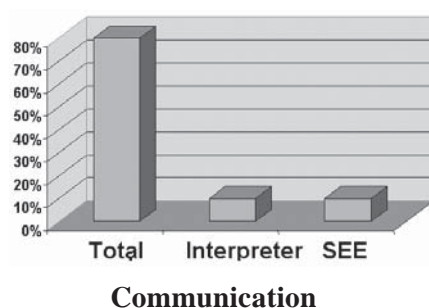
**Language Instruction**

As indicated in Figure 1, two languages, American Sign Language (ASL) and Signed English are used as languages of instruction for deaf students in these schools. The figure indicates that Sixty percent (60%) of the teachers use ASL in their classrooms while 40% use Signed English. ASL is mostly used for deaf learners, as majority of the teachers are formally trained in ASL.

### Teachers' preferred mode of communicating with deaf learners

Respondents of this study were asked to indicate what their preferred language of communicating and teaching deaf learners was. The questionnaire requested that respondents indicate their preference by comparing three options of Sign language, Total communication and SEE (Signing Exact English). The findings are shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Communication Options Preferred by Teachers**



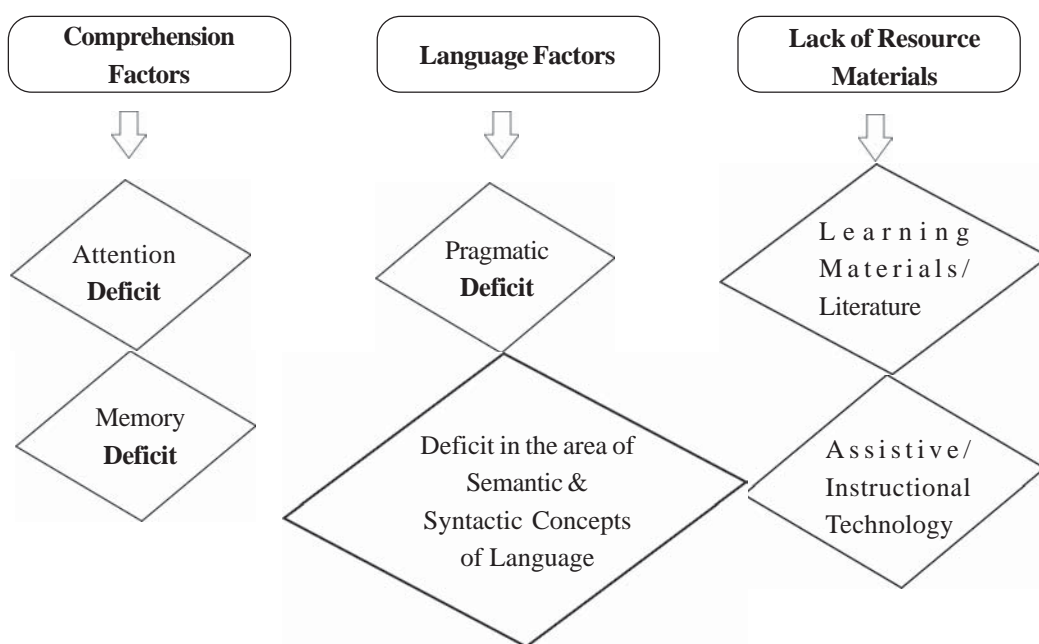
As reflected in figure 2, the majority of teachers preferred total communication. Total communication is an eclectic approach which uses a combination of different modes of communication. This medium has the potential to be used as a medium of instruction, as all learners are not the same: some are visual; some are auditory-oral. This might be the reason why it is preferred by the majority of the respondents. Other types of sign languages received very little interest from teachers of the deaf learners.

### Problems faced by teachers of deaf learners

Teachers were asked to indicate problems that they face as they teach learners with hearing impairment. A number of problems were cited and these were classified into three sub-categories of (i) Comprehension factors (ii) Language use factors and (iii) Resource factors.

These categories are further explained through a graphic presentation of these factors as shown in figure 3. The three critical features of comprehension factors, communication (Language Use) and resources are explained briefly.

**Figure 3. Problems faced by the Teachers**



### **Comprehension factors**

Issues mentioned here included lack of comprehension, learners who are attention deficient and memory deficient. Respondents of the study expressed concerns that the majority of deaf learners did not understand them when teaching, since the mode of instruction is usually in either a language that learners do not understand well e.g. Signed English or American Sign Language. One participant, for example, lamented this situation by stating that “learners can’t remember what has been taught last week.” The sentiment of this respondent was echoed by others, who felt that students with hearing impairment have low memory or they easily forget what they have been taught. Thus, there seems to be a serious lack of comprehension ability that exists in these deaf learners. Learners’ attention deficient was

yet another factor that teachers of the deaf learners perceived to be a major problem in the education of the deaf learners. One teacher, for example, was cited as saying, “these students lack concentration.” This becomes a problem for the teachers as lack of concentration leads to these students not grasping the concepts of learning. Thus, this is a problem not only to teachers but also learners, who always failed their tests or assessment exercises. They are also reported to have low self-esteem.

### **Language factors**

It was stated by the respondents that the languages they use (American Sign Language and Signed English) are not natural languages of the deaf learners in Botswana. American Sign Language has been developed with the culture and experiences of American deaf people. Obviously, some of the signs would carry a different meaning when applied to the Botswana situation. This kind of confusion or decontextualisation breaks down communication and thus learners do not benefit much in this situation. As can be recalled, earlier on, it was indicated that teachers believe that deaf learners can benefit from the use of total communication. However, the situation in secondary schools of Botswana is that teachers are not well prepared to use this language. Thus, when Signed English and American Sign languages are used, problems of syntax and semantics should be expected as ASL and the Signed English have different grammatical structure. The problem of semantics referred to here, is a situation where a deaf learner is left without understanding or getting the meaning/information that was relayed to him or her. One respondent, for example, interpreted this problem by stating that “these students have language defects”. This can be a frustrating experience for the learners.

### **Resource factors**

Respondents of this study mentioned a number of resources, which if made available can make learning experiences meaningful and fruitful for deaf learners. Resources such as relevant learning materials and supporting technologies are absent in many schools. The absence of these resources does not augur well for the education of deaf people. One respondent had this to say “There is not even an overhead projector to present the materials visually.”

## **SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The language of instruction is an element that needs to be considered from the beginning of the learning experiences and be treated as an important and integral aspect of the curriculum of Botswana. If, for example, deaf learners are to benefit fairly from the education system, their ways of communication should be catered for, in the system. Participants emphasised that the language of the deaf can be a major determining factor for their success. Every language is important to its speakers and if all students have to benefit, it has to be used in schools, regardless of the number of learners who speak or use that kind of language. The sign languages, for example, are primary languages for the deaf children and the appropriate genre of sign language should be applied.

Imagine a situation in which a deaf child has to be provided with counseling and guidance sessions to guard against the deadly effects of some diseases such as HIV/AIDS and service providers do not know their language, or worse still, they are not interested in communicating in any language other than Setswana and English. Situations like these can seriously put the lives of the deaf people in danger. Equally important then, is the need to use the preferred sign language that students understand. There is need to ensure that a culture of positive learning for the deaf in secondary schools of Botswana, is developed.

When teachers were asked to indicate their preferences in relation to the language of instruction for deaf learners, total communication was given as number one priority. Total communication includes both oral and manual language. Though by definition total communication mean ‘any means of communication’ but in real practice, it has become ‘simultaneous communication’ (11). The reasons for preferring “total communication” are as follows:

- It helps all types of students, as some students are predominantly visual learners, at the same time, some students have residual hearing and use auditory mode.
- All the teachers are not proficient in the two sign languages (Signed English and American Sign Language), so total communication may augment their deficits.

Those who preferred to use total communication as medium of instructions ascribed to the fact that students can understand better.

However, it has to be noted that regardless of the mode of communication used, support services have been cited as factors leading to the failure of deaf learners in secondary schools. For example, teachers who decide to use total communication run the risk of seeing their learners having no supplementary materials. Availability of the materials was thus cited as a critical support. Also, teacher aides were seen as important support. The presence of a teacher aide is crucial. It relieves regular teachers of some tasks such as explaining some concepts, because teacher aides are adults with hearing impairment/deafness. They are proficient in communicating with sign language, thus teacher aides are needed to help with some classroom activities. Also, assistive devices such as hearing aids, FM systems are to be availed. Instructional devices such as over head projectors and computer guided instructions are also needed. Education of the deaf, for example, cannot be successful without the use of assistive and instructional technologies. Other factors that were perceived to be important in enhancing and promoting teaching of the deaf people included inviting resources persons to the classrooms. For example, health and other educational professionals can be called when there is a discussion of a topic relevant to their area of expertise. It was also suggested, that there is need for the school to develop a strong parent teacher association with the goal of promoting the education of the deaf students.

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