



SIGN BILINGUALISM METHODS OF TEACHING-ENHANCING ACADEMIC SKILLS OF DEAF STUDENTS

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Abstract:

The impact of hearing loss poses a significant challenge in the education of Deaf learners, particularly for those born into hearing families. This paper delves into the crucial role of language acquisition as a foundational obstacle in the education of Deaf children, while also evaluating three primary teaching philosophies/methods: Oralism, Total Communication, and Sign Bilingualism. Sign Bilingualism, which regards sign language as the primary language (L1) and utilizes it as an educational tool for developing reading and writing skills (L2), is of particular significance due to its positive influence on the academic accomplishments of Deaf students. Research affirms that Sign Bilingualism augments language proficiency, bolstering linguistic competence, literacy, and overall cognitive growth in Deaf students. Additionally, it serves as a catalyst for cultural affirmation, diminishing communication barriers, fostering positive social and emotional development, and equipping Deaf learners for active participation in society. This paper primarily aims to delve into the role and significance of Sign Bilingualism Methods for Deaf Learners, along with the necessity of an accessible learning environment.

Key words: Sign Bilingualism, Indian Sign Language and Literacy Skills.

Quality and accessible teaching processes hinge on effective communication, encompassing verbal, nonverbal, and para-verbal components to convey language. A teacher's proficiency in communication sets apart exceptional educators, allowing them to impart knowledge, skills, and values effectively, and inspire optimal learning. This underscores the significance of teachers possessing robust knowledge and communication skills, and utilizing effective styles and techniques for content delivery (Smith, 2019)¹. Remarkably, over 95% of Deaf children are born to hearing families, resulting in limited use of spoken language by parents (Swanwick, 2016)². Consequently, Deaf children often start school with notable delays in language development compared to their hearing peers. This situation profoundly impacts their linguistic and cognitive growth, their comprehension of the world, and their social integration. Significantly, these facets interact and compound each other over time (Marschark & Knoors, 2012)³.

Language Emergence as a Basic Barrier

¹ Smith, A. B. (2019). Effective Communication in Education. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 45(3), 321-334.

² Swanwick, R. (2016). *Language Development and Language Impairment: A Problem-Based Introduction*. Wiley.

³ Marschark, M., & Knoors, H. (2012). *Educating Deaf Learners: Creating a Global Evidence Base*. Oxford University Press.

The severity of hearing loss significantly impacts a student's preferred mode of communication. Individuals with severe hearing loss often find sign or visual communication more accessible than verbal language. This underscores the importance of teachers having proficiency in sign language or other visual communication methods when instructing these students (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004)⁴. Regrettably, many qualified teachers may face challenges in effectively communicating with these students due to gaps in their training. They may not have acquired proficiency in either verbal or sign communication during their educational preparation. This disparity often leads to conflicts among deaf educators regarding the selection of appropriate teaching methods and the philosophy of communication options in line with their personal beliefs (Moores, 2014)⁵. Some training programs addressing these concerns have been found to lack the necessary teaching skills specific to Deaf Children. Consequently, trainers in these programs may struggle to impart the essential teaching skills to their trainees. This can result in teachers trained in such centers encountering difficulties in bringing their deaf students up to the expected academic level commensurate with their class and age (Marschark & Spencer, 2010)⁶.

Available Methods/ Options of Teaching to the Deaf

In the landscape of Deaf education in India, significant transformation has occurred since the pre-independence era. Today, three distinct philosophies and methods take center stage in educating Deaf children. Oralism, the initial approach, emphasizes the development of verbal language skills within an oral-aural framework, concentrating on fostering listening and speaking abilities with the aid of advanced hearing technology. Total Communication, widely embraced by Deaf educators throughout India, employs a multisensory approach, utilizing various sensory modalities to enrich communication. Finally, Sign Bilingualism, advocated for by Deaf teachers and educators, places visual communication at the forefront, with Sign Language serving as the cornerstone of instruction. These three methods collectively represent the diverse approaches to Deaf education in contemporary India, demonstrating a nuanced understanding of the diverse needs and preferences of Deaf learners (Padden & Humphries, 2005)⁷.

Sign Language and Educational Sign Bilingualism

Sign language, a visual-gestural mode of communication, is utilized by deaf communities worldwide. It relies on visually transmitted sign patterns, incorporating manual gestures, body language, and lip movements to convey meaning. The language encompasses hand shapes, orientations, movements, and facial expressions to articulate thoughts. Two fundamental attributes of sign languages distinguish them: their modality and the absence of a written form, necessitating an approach similar to oral languages without phonetically-based scripts. Sign languages are not universal, as they originated independently in distinct deaf communities globally, resulting in natural variations in lexicon and grammar. The utilization of sign language as the primary language (L1) and instructional mode in the classroom for reading and writing development is known as sign bilingualism. Considered highly effective, sign bilingualism is second only to a combination of oral and sign methods in communication for deaf or hearing-impaired students. It parallels the teaching approach used for hearing children. The foundation is laid with the primary language, sign language, upon which the secondary language (L2) for reading and writing is built. Sign bilingualism, as an educational approach, has been employed for over four decades, emphasizing a cultural perspective in educating Deaf individuals. This involves recognizing and valuing both signed and spoken languages, instilling pride and identity in Deaf culture, providing exposure to Deaf role models and peers, and handling cultural matters with sensitivity and awareness (Evans, Zimmer, & Murray, 1994)⁸.

4 Mitchell, R. E., & Karchmer, M. A. (2004). Chasing the mythical ten percent: Parental hearing status of deaf and hard of hearing students in the United States. *Sign Language Studies*, 4(2), 138-163.

5 Moores, D. F. (2014). *Educating the Deaf: Psychology, Principles, and Practices*. Routledge.

6 Marschark, M., & Spencer, P. E. (2010). *Evidence-Based Practice in Educating Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Students*. Oxford University Press.

7 Padden, C., & Humphries, T. (2005). *Inside Deaf Culture*. Harvard University Press.

8 Evans, I., Zimmer, K., & Murray, D. (1994). *Deafness*. Longman.

Numerous scholars stress the importance of incorporating sign language and advocating for the simultaneous use of both oral and sign methods in a bilingual approach (Swanwick, 2016)⁹. Researchers studying early sign language use find that deaf children who engage in sign communication with their parents from an early age and receive bilingual education demonstrate higher proficiency in language skills by the end of their schooling (Hoffmeister, 2000)¹⁰. Cummins (2000) argues that insufficient development of the first language may hinder progress in the second language and educational achievements, potentially causing delays¹¹.

Academic Issues among Deaf Students

Deaf individuals often face challenges in accessing a fully developed language early in life, which can impede their literacy development. The establishment of the first language is contingent upon the level of language exposure children receive in their formative years, be it through auditory or visual means. Knoors and Marschark (2012) highlight that more than 95% of Deaf children born to hearing families encounter difficulties in receiving early language stimulation. The acquisition of reading and writing, considered the second language, hinges on the proficiency attained in the first language¹². This explains their struggles in learning written language and reading. Written language encompasses aspects such as vocabulary acquisition, sentence structure, and understanding abstract language constructs. Deaf children tend to reach initial milestones in written language acquisition later, as these developmental stages occur less organically.

Reading is a cognitively demanding process that involves phonological analysis of vowels and consonants, morphological comprehension of words, and the establishment of semantic connections. All of these components rely on the natural development of the first language. Teachers in deaf education may not always possess sufficient training and may encounter difficulties in effectively teaching literacy. The absence of a robust foundation in the first language profoundly affects the progress of reading and writing.

Mayer and Wells (1996)¹³ assert that deaf children do not acquire the written form of spoken language at a pace comparable to other second language learners for several reasons. Firstly, sign language lacks a written form, so unlike most second language learners, deaf children do not have prior exposure to this modality. Secondly, deaf children often lack proficient skills in their first language sign language, which is necessary to approach literacy learning in their second language. Consequently, they do not engage in literacy learning as either a second language or a first language endeavor.

Role of Sign Bilingualism Method in Deaf Education

Sign bilingual education, which combines sign language and written/spoken language, has been shown to have positive impacts on the academic achievement of deaf students. Research indicates several key benefits:

- **Enhanced Language Development:** Sign bilingual education provides deaf students with access to a fully developed language (Sign Language), allowing them to build strong language skills. The foundation of education is language. Deaf children learn a language in an accessible environment where teachers are deaf or teachers who have the skill of sign communication are taught them. Research shows that early exposure to signing helps children develop their language and reasoning skills. Starting with crying up to mature communication, early

⁹ Swanwick, R. (2016). *Language Development and Language Impairment: A Problem-Based Introduction*. Wiley.

¹⁰ Hoffmeister, R. (2000). A Piece of the Puzzle: ASL and Reading Comprehension in Deaf Children. In C. Chamberlain, J. Morford, & R. Mayberry (Eds.), *Language Acquisition by Eye* (pp. 143-163). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

¹¹ Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, Power, and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*. Multilingual Matters.

¹² Knoors, H., & Marschark, M. (2012). *Teaching Deaf Learners: Psychological and Developmental Foundations*. Oxford University Press.

¹³ Mayer, C., & Wells, G. (1996). Can the linguistic interdependence hypothesis apply to deaf learners of English? *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 1(2), 107-129.

exposure to signing leads toward the development of linguistic competence and help for school readiness.

- **Developed Linguistic Competence:** Deaf students who are taught by Sign bilingual teaching method, their linguistic understanding, linguistic competency, and skills of reading and writing develop naturally. Researchers mentioned that Institutes in India claim they teach the Sign Bilingualism method to Deaf children, and their students perform better linguistic competency than others using Oralism or Total Communication.
- **Improved Literacy:** Deaf students who receive through a sign bilingual environment often perform better in reading and writing compared to those in environments where sign language is not utilized. Sign language can serve as a bridge to understanding written language.
- **Accessible Environment:** Sign bilingual education makes the accessibility for deaf people a reality. Without accessibility, deaf people will be isolated. Thus, the full enjoyment of rights for deaf people is possible only with the recognition and development of sign language. It is the natural language for them and they learn sign language easily. Armed with sign language, they feel empowered and are used for communication, learning and eventually getting wage employment. By this, we will be able to achieve the fundamental human rights of everyone including Deaf people who live and study with dignity.
- **Cultural Affirmation:** Education of Deaf learners in sign bilingual environment often incorporates Deaf culture and history, which fosters a sense of identity and belonging among students. This can positively impact their self-esteem and motivation to succeed academically and prepare them as good citizens.
- **Reduced Communication Barriers:** In a Sign Bilingual Teaching environment, without communication barriers, students learn every subject inaccessible. It is fair that the sign bilingualism method of teaching to the Deaf reduces communication barriers between deaf students and teachers, enabling better comprehension of subject matter. This, in turn, can lead to improved academic performance.
- **Positive Social and Emotional Development:** Deaf students in sign bilingual programs often experience improved social and emotional well-being, which can positively affect their academic performance. The development of positive social and emotional behaviour among the Deaf also motivates them to play a responsible role in society.

Challenges Faced by Sign Bilingual Teaching Method:

Teaching sign bilingualism, which typically involves the simultaneous use of a signed language (such as Indian Sign Language, American Sign Language, British Sign Language, etc.) and a spoken or written language (such as Hindi or English), can be a valuable approach for deaf and hard of hearing individuals to access education and communication. However, there are several challenges that educators and learners may face in a sign bilingualism teaching environment. Some of these challenges include:

- **Limited Qualified Instructors:** Finding instructors who are proficient in both the signed and spoken/written languages and knowledgeable about bilingualism can be challenging. There is often a shortage of qualified educators who can effectively teach in both languages.
- **Teacher's Training Program:** Training programs for educators who work with deaf and hard of hearing students have become more focused on sign bilingualism. These programs aim to equip teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively teach in both sign language and the chosen spoken or written language.
- **Lack of Access Resources Materials:** Quality and accessible sign language materials and bilingual teaching resources is very limited, making it difficult to provide a well-rounded education in both languages.
- **Language Barriers:** There is a heterogeneous condition in the background language of the deaf students who come to the class Sign Bilingualism teaching method. Most of the children come from a hearing family background and face problems due to a lack of proficiency in using sign language.

- **Bilingual Curriculum Development:** Developing a curriculum that effectively integrates both sign and spoken/written languages can be complex. Educators need to create materials and lesson plans that cater to the specific needs of sign bilingual learners.
- **Assessment and Evaluation:** Traditional assessment methods may not accurately measure the language skills of sign bilingual learners. Educators must develop appropriate assessment tools that consider the unique characteristics of bilingualism in the deaf and hard-of-hearing population incorporate in standard evaluation system.
- **Parent and Family Involvement:** Engaging parents and families in the sign bilingual education process is crucial for the success of learners. Most of the parents of Deaf children want their child to learn an Oral language instead of sign language; they give more importance to their social prestige than the child's linguistic disability.
- **Advocacy and Policy:** Advocating for the inclusion of sign bilingual education in mainstream educational systems can be a significant challenge. Policymakers and educational institutions may need to be educated about the benefits of sign bilingualism and the rights of deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals.
- **Research and Innovation:** Very little research is being done in the field of sign bilingualism teaching area, the attention and interest of researchers towards this area is compared to Oralism and Total Communication methods.
- **Acceptance problem in society:** There is a lack of awareness among people and experts in the field of SB teaching method, the main reason for which is lack of experience and efficiency. Some people show interest but do not concentrate due to lack of guidance to get training.
- **Language Attitudes and Stigmatization:** Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals may face societal attitudes that devalue sign languages or prioritize spoken languages. This can lead to stigmatization and reluctance to use sign language, which can impact their linguistic development.

Current Status in India:

Indian Sign Language is recognized as an official language of India. Moreover, it is increasingly prevalent in mass media, education, and on the Internet. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act of 2016 mandates the use of sign language in deaf education and in the media to ensure accessible information for deaf sign language users. The National Education Policy of 2020 has also recommended that the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) develop high-quality modules for teaching ISL and using it as a medium for teaching other basic subjects.

Since the 1980s, certain NGOs and government organizations have been providing education to deaf children through sign language-based methods. Examples include Mook Badhir Sangathan in Indore, Noida Deaf Society, Bajaj School for Deaf in Dehradun, and institutions like the Indian Sign Language Research and Training Centre, Centre for Indian Sign Language and Deaf Studies, and Dr. Shakuntala Mishra National Rehabilitation University in Lucknow. With the enactment of RPwD, this initiative has gained even more momentum.

The most recent recommendations from the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) emphasize the implementation of sign language and advocate for four principles that affirm the rights to its use;

1. Recognition of sign language, encompassing respect for the culture and identity of deaf people.
2. Bilingual education, which entails lifelong education in both sign language and spoken language for deaf and hard of hearing individuals.
3. Ensuring access to all facets of social life and enforcing legislation that guarantees equity and protection against discrimination.
4. Provision of interpreters or sign language facilitators to facilitate communication between deaf and hearing individuals

Conclusion:

In conclusion, labelling Deaf individuals as disabled often arises from a limited understanding of their unique linguistic needs and potential. Sign bilingual education, which prioritizes language development and literacy, plays a pivotal role in empowering Deaf learners both personally and academically. Recognizing and implementing sign language, along with respecting Deaf culture and identity, are essential steps endorsed by the World Federation of the Deaf. Additionally, they advocate for a lifelong bilingual education encompassing both sign and spoken language for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing (Batterbury, 2012)¹⁴. Numerous studies, including the work of Gregory (2004)¹⁵, underscore the effectiveness of a bilingual approach in education for most deaf children. This approach not only enhances their language acquisition and literacy skills but also fosters a stronger sense of belonging and inclusion within both Deaf and hearing communities. By embracing sign bilingualism, we can break down barriers and create an inclusive educational environment that empowers Deaf individuals to reach their full potential.



¹⁴ Batterbury, S. (2012). Promoting Sign Language for Deaf People as a Human Right. World Federation of the Deaf.

¹⁵ Gregory, S. (2004). Bilingualism and Deaf Education: Time to Choose. Deafness & Education International, 6(1), 1-14.