

Emergent Approaches towards Sign Bilingualism in Deaf Education in Kenya

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Abstract

Deaf education in Kenya has faced a downward trend in recent decades. Findings over the years (KSDC⁴⁷ 1979, Ndurumo 1993 Okombo 1994, Adoyo 1995) show that the deaf have consistently trailed behind their hearing counterparts in academic performances. All inquiries have pointed to teachers' lack of competence in the language of instruction as the major obstacle to their academic development. This paper discusses language accessibility for deaf children to enhance sign bilingualism and curriculum content understanding in the Kenyan deaf classroom. It highlights the changes in the teaching methodologies that have taken place without much success. The paper then argues in favour of the changes that recognise deaf children's use of natural language - Kenyan Sign language (KSL) within the sign bilingualism framework as the language of instruction. And lastly, the paper proposes high KSL competence for the deaf educator and suggests some steps toward sign bilingualism implementation in the way forward.

Introduction

Education of the deaf worldwide has been one of the most controversially discussed topics. The issue has been the difficulty in finding an appropriate classroom communication system that effectively provides access to curriculum content. Subsequently, there have been changes in search for a better teaching methodology (Gallimore 1993). From pure Oralism⁴⁸ to Total com-

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48 Oralism advocates the use of oral education methods with all students with hearing impairment. The oral method emphasises on the development of skills in the areas of speech, speech reading and residual hearing. (Connor, 1986 in Paul & Jackson 1993)

munication⁴⁹ and now toward sign bilingualism. Yet the question has remained unresolved as to which particular method best suits the deaf.

While deaf education in Kenya is not a recent development, it has not shown significant improvement as was expected. A number of studies have documented that pupils still finish school semi-illiterate. Existing investigations (KSDC 1979, Nkangi & Mbindyo 1981, Makumi 1995, Kinaga 1987, Republic of Kenya 1988, Ndurumo 1993, Okombo 1994, Adoyo 2001) have pointed to the inappropriate language of instruction as the key issue, which must be strongly and urgently addressed.

Although there are movements towards sign bilingualism (a strategy in which sign and spoken language have equal status and play equal roles as media of instruction) in many countries, this is yet to be realised in Kenya as many schools are still stick to Simultaneous Communication (SC), a form of contrived sign system developed to represent the morphosyntactic structure of spoken languages. This artificial communication mode differs from Sign Language (SL) in a number of ways. First, it is a bimodal communication in which the signs are executed simultaneously with speech. Speech is supposed to provide additional information through the use of intonation and other suprasegmental features. Sign Language however uses non-manual signals to convey those linguistic and paralinguistic information. Secondly, Wilbur (1987) has observed that though the lexicon of Sign Language forms the basis of the Simultaneous Communication system, the signs do not retain their original syntactic and semantic property as would appear in natural Sign Languages and this makes it difficult for message equivalence.

Even though Simultaneous Communication, which most Kenyan deaf educators confuse with Kenyan Sign Language, is popular in schools and training institutions, studies (Erting 1985), Mammor & Pettito 1979) have revealed that during its use, teachers fail to represent spoken language accurately due

49 Total communication is an educational policy that encourages teachers to use all means of communication at their disposal, including ASL, English, Pantomime, drawing, and finger spelling. Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan (1996) have explained that practically, total communication has become Simultaneous Communication. This is exactly what has happened in Kenya

to modality difference, i.e. vocal and gestural output. Johnson et al, (1989) reporting on the demerits of Simultaneous Communication argue that it suffers not only from distortion, but also from omission of obligatory words, which do not fit the rhythmic pattern of spoken languages. A survey by Adoyo (1995) in Kenya also revealed that many teachers in schools for the deaf had great difficulties in communicating ideas to deaf pupils through Simultaneous Communication. And here, in the failure of Simultaneous Communication - lies the whole problem.

Furthermore it is not only the production of Simultaneous Communication which is difficult for the teachers, deaf adults have also reported tremendous strains on reception of Simultaneous Communication information, arguing that while they can process each item as it appears, they find it hard to process the message content as a whole when all the information in the sign stream is presented as sequential elements (Bellugi 1980 quoted in Livingstone 1997). The pertinent question is: if deaf adults experience difficulty and strain processing Simultaneous Communication which is speech driven, what must it be like for young deaf children without any spoken language background trying to learn and to be taught through Simultaneous Communication as if it were a natural language?

What amazes is that while deaf pupils are instructed in Simultaneous Communication, they use Kenyan Sign Language while on their own with ease. This is a testament to an innate grammatical competence in the brain, a phenomenon which Gee and Goodhart (1985) call „nativization”. This theory stipulates that without appropriate and adequate exposure to a naturally occurring language, children will innovate their own set of grammatical rules according to the innate dictates of their human biological capacity for language. The deaf children out of their own develop a system, which represents the expression of the human linguistic biological capacity in the manual/visual modality, which is Sign language as opposed to spoken language.

Kenyan Sign Language

There is no international Sign Language, but different national Sign languages due to the fact that signs are culturally determined. Different Sign Languages have therefore developed in different parts of the world. For example, German Sign Language, American Sign Language, Zambian Sign Language, Ugandan Sign Language and many others. Kenyan Sign Language is therefore the visual gestural language that serves as the primary means of communication for deaf people in Kenya.

While many Kenyans still doubt Kenyan Sign Language is a complete language, works by Akach (1991), Okombo (1994) Adoyo (1995) show that like other sign languages, it is a formal, socially agreed-on, rule-governed symbol system that is generative in nature. The components of Kenyan Sign Language are not phoneme (sound) combinations that form words as in spoken languages, but rather are phonological combinations (i.e. hand shapes, hand positions, hand movements and orientation of the palm) that form signs. While speech is auditory, vocal and temporal, signs used in Kenyan Sign Language are best described as visual, motor and spatial, KSL consists of movements, of shapes, and positions of specific body part, such as hands, arms, eyes, face and head. Concepts are executed with manual and other systematic non-manual signals. Though different in the modes of expression, Kenyan Sign Language and other spoken languages are equivalent in their communicative potentials.

Due to demographic factors in a country that has 43 indigenous spoken languages, regional variations have manifested in Kenyan Sign Language lexicon. However, as a result of sociolinguistic factors such as language emergence and growth, convergence and wave phenomena⁵⁰, the variations have been able to converge into one major variety (Okombo & Akach 1997). The

50 This paper uses growth to mean the emergence of a new language and its development. Convergence is used to refer to a situation in which different languages come together through the social interaction of their users to become one language. Wave phenomena means the process of diffusion by which innovation in some regions where a language is used are spread to other regions from which the innovation in question did not originate (Okombo & Akach 1997)

deaf community communicates using this standard variety, which has proved a major marker in defining the community, resulting in a strong establishment of culture, a sense of identity, and understanding.

Bilingualism

Bilingualism and the related bilingual education have been topics of concerns amongst scholars and other professionals. In Sub-Saharan Africa for instance there are large numbers of languages and children are born in this bilingual/multilingual environment. Kenya for example has 43 ethnic groups speaking different languages but it operates under a trilingual system. One of the factors that has influenced Bilingual Education in Kenya is the language policy which states that the mother tongue, within the catchment area of a school, be used as the language of instruction in pre-school, the first three years of school and in adult education programmes. English is the official language and the language of instruction from grade 4 up to university. Kiswahili, the national language, which is widely used as the lingua franca all over the country and the whole of East Africa, is taught as a compulsory subject and second language at both the primary and secondary levels of education⁵¹.

Sign bilingualism.

The primary goal in bilingual education in both the deaf and the hearing is the same. However, the paths through which to approach the goal are different. While bilingualism in the hearing uses two spoken languages, the term „Sign bilingualism” is used for the deaf to describe the use of two languages in different modalities i.e. signed and spoken languages. Models of bilingual education have been adapted and modified to suit the circumstances of deaf children.

Although there are many parallels between the linguistic and cultural situations of bilingual deaf and hearing children, there are also significant differ-

ences. For instance, a sign bilingual policy places emphasis on the role of Sign Language and deaf adults in the linguistic and educational development of deaf children. The policy addresses deaf awareness and identity, reflecting a range of criteria beyond those purely related to academic achievement. This strategy is now strong in current linguistics and educational theories. The approach advocates for deaf children's need to acquire a natural signed language for cognitive development and as a basic ground for second language acquisition.

Because deaf children of hearing parents, who constitute 95% of the deaf population (Conrad 1979) do not have access to the acquisition of a first language early enough, they reach school with restricted linguistic and social preparation. The impact of this on the structure of schooling is that the school must prepare the children for acquisition of a first natural language for second language acquisition, socialisation and development of world knowledge (Cummins & Swain 1986; Johnson, Liddell & Erting 1989). These tasks, generally undertaken naturally in their infancy at home, will only take place in school. The school administration must therefore ensure that in these circumstances, the school environment is linguistically rich to facilitate rapid and easy Sign Language acquisition while at the same time using it to deliver curriculum content.

Implication to language policy.

Skuttnab Kangas (1994) defines mother tongue in a number of ways, as; *the language one is identified with, the language one identifies with, the language one knows best, the language one uses most*. From these definitions, it is convincing that Kenyan Sign Language is the mother tongue for deaf people in Kenya. This therefore entails its use as medium of instruction for the first three years of school as required by the language policy. Although the policy requires a transitional change to English as pupils move to grade four, this paper proposes maintenance of sign bilingualism for deaf Kenyans, as this will ensure Kenyan Sign Language use throughout the education system. As

51 It should however be noted that Kiswahili is the language of instruction in pre-school and the first three years of school in urban centres where there are mixtures of groups

Okombo (1994) points out, the teaching/learning of Kenyan Sign Language must also be addressed because though deaf children may acquire sign language in the natural setting provided by the school community, the degree of competence they require for educational purposes, and for complex discourse in their adult life after school, cannot be achieved from mere exposure to a language whether spoken or signed. The pertinent question is; how competent are the teachers in Kenyan Sign Language, to not only teach the language, but also to use it in curriculum delivery?

Adoyo (1995, 2000, 2001) has, for instance, reported teachers' lack of competence in Kenyan Sign Language. Reasons for this are many, for example Okombo (1994) reports lack of Kenyan Sign Language experts as a potential problem in the teachers' training institutions. Another reason, which is but an attitudinal one, is lack of interest in this area. Though teachers interact daily with deaf children who are native Kenyan Sign Language speakers and who can provide them with an ideal environment for signing, there is still a low attitude toward this indigenous language as a medium of instruction. This is contrary to findings in other parts of the world which are reporting significant academic improvement through the use of their respective Sign languages.

Rationale for sign bilingualism.

The benefits for sign bilingualism are many. As a co- medium of instruction, it has opened up opportunities for the deaf in many parts of the world thus enhancing their quality of life. In their research comparing bilinguals and monolinguals, Hakuta (1986) and Lambert (1977) have noted that bilinguals have high cognitive flexibility, are more sensitive to semantic relation among words, and are creative in solving problems. One way of approaching sign bilingualism in the education of deaf in Kenya is to let Kenyan Sign Language and English share the role of medium of instruction in the teaching at all levels of education as noted previously. Kenyan Sign Language would be the medium of active communication, while English plays the role of written communication, either in writing or via fingerspelling.

The implications for the deaf Kenyans who must learn written language e.g. English, are clear. That is, sign bilingual education using Kenyan Sign Language as the language of instruction will teach subject matter better and will impart background knowledge and skills that will facilitate learning of spoken language (especially written English). Since all the examinations in Kenya are written in English, improving English literacy would lead to improved academic achievement. As the deaf children become bilingual in English and Kenyan Sign Language, they will be more capable of a variety of cognitive skills, which are crucial for academic work. The results will be a decrease in dropout rates as well as underemployment on leaving school. This is the ultimate aim.

From the foregoing discussion, the usefulness of a deaf child being bilingual is clear. And as was explained earlier, it is also the child's linguistic competence in the first language, which in this case is Kenyan Sign Language that will facilitate acquisition of written language and world knowledge. Evidence in the discussion however has shown that teachers lack this linguistic competence. The next question is; how will teachers who are not competent in the medium of instruction teach the children using a language that they are not competent in? The solution is summarised in Stephens (1980:181) words:

In order to improve the educational system for the deaf pupils, we must first re-educate the teachers and reduce the prejudice that leads to oppression.

This suggestion has been echoed many times. However one main problem concerning the introduction of Kenyan Sign Language as a subject and medium of communication in the education and training of the deaf in Kenya has been the lack of qualified personnel in the training institutions. As Okombo (1994) explains:

Our training colleges such as Kenya Institute of Special Education and the Universities which offer special education, do not have trainers who are competent in Kenyan Sign Language.

As a way forward, the following suggestions could be put into consideration

- Having deaf Kenyans who can handle the practical areas, as well as Kenyan Sign Language instructors, work together with linguists who can handle the theoretical aspects of the programme. The Kenyan policy makers will have to ignore the academic certificate requirements for these deaf individuals at this stage if we realistically need improvement in this area. The ongoing programme at Maseno University, department of special education, in which a deaf and a bilingual instructor are working in collaboration with a linguist is a move towards the right direction;
- New changes and developments in society, research, and schools and in areas of deafness now demand innovative approaches in teacher preparation. For instance, research in schools with young deaf children points to the need for learning to occur in an environment in which communication is consistently accessible and clear. Evident too is the awareness that a strong foundation in a first language is important, together with potentially positive effects of a bilingual strategy to education, suggesting a need for new methods of instruction and high competence of sign language for teachers of the deaf (Sass-Lehrer & Martin 1992);
- Many teachers still doubt the status of Kenyan Sign Language as a real language due to the assumption that language must be spoken. This attitude is difficult to defeat. Together with this is the legacy of colonial education in Africa, which recognised those who speak English as elites that belong to a class of their own. This mentality has made teachers to prefer Simultaneous communication, (a bimodal artificial communication that use signs mapped on the English word order) to Kenyan Sign Language. Consequently, Kenyan Sign Language has become a victim of neo-colonialism. This violation of the linguistic human right must be resisted at all costs as it deprives deaf children (who keep languages alive) of the use and development of Kenyan Sign Language;
- The teachers` level of understanding and skill in communication and language, regardless of particular modes of communication should be

the focus in teacher preparation. There is need to understand the way linguistic behaviour is affected by the children's communication mode. The critical issue of whether to use a natural sign language or signed form of a spoken language as the appropriate linguistic base for the deaf must be viewed by the teacher trainers (Sass-Lehrer & Martin 1992);

- Most of the students who go into teacher education are hearing students who may or may not have had contact with sign language. There is need to provide an intensive immersion course in Kenyan Sign Language so that they can concentrate on developing language competence with which to deliver curriculum content. Emphasis should also be laid on the teachers' ability to understand the signing of young children, as this is often different to adult signing;
- It has been observed that student teachers of the deaf in Kenya are not gaining the appropriate knowledge needed to work within a bilingual framework. They do not have ample opportunity to learn or effectively apply Kenyan Sign Language, to study the linguistics of the language or to become knowledgeable in deaf culture. In addition, the curriculum does not offer training in the areas of bilingualism. The training is not emphasising the critical relationship between language, cognition, culture and the process of total human development and learning. There is vital need to incorporate these areas in the teacher's curriculum;
- There is need for teacher trainees who are well prepared in content areas as well as in pedagogy. Apart from high communication skills, teachers of the deaf must possess the essential content background and expertise to teach subject matter such as science, Mathematics, Craft, Kiswahili, Biology, Chemistry, etc;
- In Kenya, all schools for the deaf are residential institutions forming a „deaf community.” This becomes an ideal environment for Kenyan Sign Language acquisition. The teachers should take advantage of this

to improve their Kenyan Sign Language skills while at the same time attending rigorous school-based in-service trainings;

- Misplacement of skills during teachers postings from training institutions is another key issue which needs agent redress. It is quite common to find trained teachers of the deaf posted to schools for the physically/mentally handicapped against their will. This is unprofessional and unfair, not only for the teacher, but also for the deaf child who cannot be taught elsewhere due to lack of professionally qualified personnel. It deprives the deaf children of talented teachers whose skills are merely wasted elsewhere. It is our assertion that teachers should work in their relevant areas of specialisation if they are to produce desirable results;
- Many uncritical Kenyan minds, including teachers, still believe that African languages are inferior to the languages of the West. A recent reply from a Kenyan deaf adult was shocking when I asked him why he was using American signs with me. He proudly said that Kenyan Sign Language was for young deaf children and those with low education. This is very unfortunate, as it has resulted into tension and struggle within the Kenyan deaf community. The tension is often a result of lack of information, awareness and exposure. As Gallimore (1993) observes, it can also be as a result of oppression itself, as sometimes members of an oppressed minority begin to work against each other. Freire (1990) calls this „horizontal violence”. Some key deaf Kenyans have differed on which sign language dictionaries should be used in schools. This situation will continue to delay research and development of Kenyan Sign Language. There is great need for unity in order to overcome this „horizontal violence” which has been used by the observers as an excuse to postpone desirable changes within the educational establishment;
- The continued search for literacy for deaf children will require teachers of the deaf to acquire new techniques including code-switching, the ability to move from sign language to a signed or written form of spo-

ken language, depending on the instructional needs of that particular moment. Education officers, inspectors as well as teachers need to become knowledgeable about these new research findings and teaching techniques;

- One of the main attitudinal problems for teachers is the feeling that Kenyan Sign Language as a language is not viable as a medium of instruction and that it has no capacity to serve as a medium for communicating complex ideas the school curriculum offers. As Okombo puts it:

Such attitudes totally ignore the unlimited creative ability of human languages as any language can make the necessary adjustments to accommodate new ideas as long as its users really want to use it in communicating those ideas (Okombo 1994:41)

Conclusion

Summarily, we have argued that Kenyan Sign Language is a complete language with all properties of human languages and deaf Kenyans need to be educated through this natural language, which they prefer to use and understand with ease. The use of Kenyan Sign Language will not only enable them to master the curriculum content but also to become bilingual, capable of participating in complex discourse in both Kenyan Sign Language and written English as these will later be important in their career and social life. These will only be possible through the guidance of a teacher with Kenyan Sign Language competence.

Zusammenfassung

Die Qualität der Ausbildung für Gehörlose nahm in Kenya in den letzten Jahrzehnten stetig ab. Seit Jahren belegen Studien, dass die akademischen Leistungen Gehörloser unter denen der Hörenden bleiben. Sämtliche Untersuchungen heben die mangelnde Qualifikation der LehrerInnen in der Unterrichtssprache als Hindernis für akademische Fortschritte hervor. Dieser Artikel setzt sich damit auseinander, welchen Zugang gehörlose SchülerInnen zur Sprache haben, um damit gebärdensprachlichem Bilin-

guismus und Verständnis für Lehrinhalte zu stärken. Er zeigt auf, wie verschiedene Unterrichtsmethoden ohne großen Erfolg angewandt wurden. In Anerkennung des natürlichen Sprachgebrauchs gehörloser Kinder sollte die „Kenyan Sign Language“ im Rahmen eines gebärdensprachlichen Bilinguismus als Unterrichtssprache verwendet werden. Für die PädagogInnen der Gehörlosen wäre eine hohe Kompetenz in „Kenyan Sign Language“ wünschenswert. Schließlich schlägt der Artikel einige konkrete Schritte für die Umsetzung des gebärdensprachlichen Bilinguismus vor.

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