

Full Length Research Paper

Ethiopian sign language and educational accessibility for the deaf community: A case study on Jimma, Nekemte, Addis Ababa and Hawasa towns

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In comparison with the large number of population they have, the deaf community have not been given due attention in terms of education in Ethiopia. This was the main problem that initiated the researcher to conduct research on this area. The general objective of this study is to assess the educational accessibility of Ethiopian Sign Language for the deaf community. The research is a qualitative one and it was based on interviews and discussions made through interpreters' assistance. Deaf students, deaf students' teachers and Zone Educational Bureaus Officers were study participants. The study is important in indicating the relevancy needed for educating people who are deaf and with hard hearing. The findings of the study indicate that deaf education in Ethiopia is characterized by absence of enough schools for the deaf and with information gap on the access of deaf education.

Key words: Sign language, Ethiopian sign language, sign language education, sign dialects, mutual intelligibility.

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Convention on the human right has defined disability as follows. "Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" (The United Nations Human Rights Treaty System; 2012: 15).

Disability is a grave concern among all the physically impaired communities of the world. Thus, it calls for global attention of mankind towards improving the life of the deaf. According to World Health Organization (WHO)

report on World Disability (2011: 22), about 15% of the world's population is living with some form of disability.

Deafness and hard hearing are among the many types of disabilities that a number of world populations might be a victim of it at any age. It is one of the disabilities of our hearing sense organ that could occur when one or both ears are affected, either totally or partially. It may occur at birth or later, suddenly or gradually. Deafness can also be classified with the degree of hearing loss in decibels (dB), ranging from mild to profound hearing loss. A loss of 35 to 70 dB is generally considered as hard of hearing, while a loss of 90 dB or greater is considered profoundly

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to be complete deaf. Some deaf are mute by nature; they cannot make any voice. But others do have the ability of making voices even if they not hear. This is because they have a problem of controlling their pitch and volume and they do not hear what others and even they themselves are saying, which would have been a great experience for them (Melanie and Linda, 2002: 13).

In most parts of the world especially developing countries, a number of deaf people have never been to school and are thus more or less illiterate. For educating the deaf people of these countries, the existence of sign language has been either ignored or repressed in many ways. The consequence is that deaf people are not aware of the rights they have in society; they live as a highly marginalized group in most developing countries. They do not have access to information, which means they do not even know what is happening in their immediate society and the world at large. Moreover, prejudices and attitudes towards educating the deaf community and the value the deaf community retain for themselves have deeply influenced their living conditions and chances of personal development. This is due to the fact that deaf people have not been educated in sign language. Improving the status of sign language has consequences for all areas of life for deaf people; it opens up possibilities for participation, information and influence, and reduction of poverty.

Sign language

Sign language is among many language types in which people with hearing difficulty can communicate with people of the same linguistic behavior and with other hearing community.

In sign language, there are different signs that represent letters, numbers and frequently used words. Sign language is not spoken or heard but it is a visual language seen by the eye and expressed by the movements of hands, face and the body. Sign language is considered as mother tongue for people who are pre-lingual deaf (become deaf before learning other language). These people can use oral communication as their second language. On the other hand, people who are post lingual deaf can use sign language second to oral one [Daniel, 2006:2].

Sign language education

According to Baynton (2006: 9) and Ceil (2004: 176), before mid-nineteenth century, the hearing participants of the International Congress of Educators of the Deaf approved a resolution in which sign language was officially banned and almost eliminated from deaf education. Sign language was no longer recognized as the language of deaf people, but was seen, at best, as suitable only for the most elementary communication

needs, as a mixture of simple pantomime and primitive gesturing incapable of conveying abstract concepts and complex ideas, as a form more closely related to sub-human forms of communication.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the education of deaf children has been characterized by a deep division between educators favoring an oral approach, in which signing is generally forbidden, and those supporting a manual approach in which signing of some sort is allowed in conjunction with speech. Although oralism remains a powerful force in deaf education, manualism is the dominant philosophical approach to deaf education today. Since the 1960s, however, there has been a growing debate among manualists about what type of signing should be employed in the education of deaf children (Armstrong, et al., 2002: 14).

According to Armstrong et al. (2002: 14), the materialization and educational implementation of manual sign codes has taken place primarily in the USA, where the strongest commitment to their use remains. In the USA context, several distinct approaches to the creation of artificial manual sign codes currently exist, although the major systems are closely related, sharing both common historical roots and underlying social and linguistic assumptions. Further, artificially constructed systems of signing all have as their principal target population deaf children at school, and all of the systems rely on teachers of the deaf and, to a lesser extent, parents of deaf children, for their successful implementation. There has been also a dramatic change in how sign language has been perceived. Scientific investigations of a number of national sign languages over the past 30 years have produced sufficient evidence that sign languages are full and complex language systems equivalent to spoken languages in functional and structural respects. These studies have demonstrated that sign languages possess sophisticated grammars and large vocabularies. Linguists have described the basic linguistic structures, rules, and functions of these languages. Moreover, Sign language is more than just abstract linguistic systems. Psychological, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic studies have also shown that the use of sign language promotes emotional, social, and mental development in deaf children. Early use of sign language facilitates concept formation, developmentally appropriate acquisition of knowledge, of social values and norms of behavior, and a high degree of overall communicative competence. There is evidence that even acquisition of the spoken and written language may be strengthened by the early acquisition of sign language. In general, early and consistent use of sign language by deaf children results in more effective learning both in and out of school.

Statement of the problem

Historically, Ethiopian sign language education has got its origin in the American Sign Language as the first

missionaries that opened schools in Addis Ababa were from the USA. Currently, Ethiopian sign language education is being studied at BA level in Addis Ababa University and at lower level in very few schools of Addis Ababa city. Among available schools for the deaf in Ethiopia, most of them are at elementary, junior and unit level which are concentrated in Addis Ababa for many years and the deaf in the regions of the country were virtually forgotten and no one cared or knew whether they can be educated at all. There are also prejudices and negative attitudes among the hearing community toward educating the deaf community and undervaluing perceptions that the deaf community retains for themselves which deeply influenced the living conditions of deaf people and their chances of personal development in the country. Therefore, so as to make the deaf community benefit from education as the hearing community does, we need to incorporate into our research the accessibility of sign language education as a means of meaningful way of educating the deaf and able to bring to the public's attention to the social, cultural, economical and political benefit of it for the deaf community.

Research questions

Therefore, in this study, the following points will be focused on:

Are there schools for the deaf outside Addis Ababa in which sign language is taught?

Do the deaf community residing outside Addis Ababa understand the Ethiopian Sign language broadcasted on ETV?

Do the deaf students who have the chance to attend higher education at Addis Ababa University originally attend lower education?

Is there any attempt/plan at government level to make education more accessible to the deaf and people with hard hearing?

Are there significant hearing trainees in Ethiopian sign language who can serve as sign interpreters and deaf school teachers?

Significance of the study

In Ethiopia, the main governmental organ responsible for the provision of social and vocational rehabilitation of persons with disability is the Ministry of Labor And Social Affairs in cooperation with some other agencies. For the responsible ministry, without adequate data on the nature and problems of disability, future plan for rehabilitation could be difficult. Therefore, upon the completion of this study, all the governmental and non-governmental bodies in need of data on Ethiopian deaf schools and sign language could refer to it. The study also can be used as starting reference for extensive research on Ethiopian Sign Language.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Historical overview of education in Ethiopia

According to Nagash (1990: 143), the establishment of modern schools was speeded up beginning with the turn of the 20th century with the remarkable efforts of Ethiopian intellectuals who had returned from abroad. Proclamation encouraging the people to give greater emphasis for modern education had also been issued in the same season which laid down the foundation for the spread of modern education in the country.

Since the 1940s, according to Nagash (1990:9), Ethiopia has experienced three systems of political governance, each distinguished by its education policy. The first system of governance was the imperial system that started in 1941 and lasted until 1974. The second was the military/socialist system that lasted until 1991. The third is the currently existing federal system of governance which became fully operational after 1994. Therefore, it is worth importance to have a general understanding of how educational development was undergone in Ethiopia through these particular regimes.

Education policy in the imperial regime

A significant age of modern education in Ethiopia is usually considered to be the years between 1941 and 1970. It is debatable what the Emperor intended by education and progress but his numerous statements on the subject indicate that modern education was to enrich Ethiopian civilization. We can find the following point regarding education during the imperial regime:

The official policy during the period of Emperor Haile Sellassie was that Ethiopia, as an ancient and civilized society, should opt for a carefully selected adaptation of European ideas and systems. In practice, however, the imperial regime did very little to inculcate respect for Ethiopian traditions of social and political organization. It left the curriculum and most of the teaching in secondary schools to expatriates who quite naturally spread the gospel of modernization (Nagash, 1990: 74).

The Emperor and his government might have believed that they were laying down the foundations for the modernization of the country but they did not pay enough attention to the communication gaps between the generations that modern schools were creating.

The socialist system government policy of education in Ethiopia

The Ethiopian political system that prevailed in the country between 1974 and 1991 was socialist/communist workers' party. The fundamental aim of education, as expressed by the Ethiopian government in the early

1980s, was to cultivate Marxist-Leninist ideology in the young generation, to develop knowledge in science and technology, and to integrate and coordinate research with production so as to enable the revolution to move forward and secure productive citizens. Curriculum was duly produced where five subjects namely, agriculture, production technology; political education, home economics and introduction to business were focused on.

Language in education in Ethiopia at present (Since 1991)

With the downfall of the Socialist System Government in 1991 and owing to sustained resistance from various political factions, Ethiopia went through significant social and political changes. EPRDF and other opposition parties constituting the transitional government of Ethiopia first proclaimed the rights of every nation and nationality of Ethiopia to use and develop its languages and cultures (TGE, 1992). This was further strengthened and confirmed in the Ethiopian constitution of 1994. To put this into effect, the Ministry of Education of Ethiopia proclaimed a new Education and Training Policy in 1994, which, among many other aspects, put the use of mother tongues into primary education (Grades 1-8).

With the coming of EPRDF into power, Ethiopia was transformed from a single party military based political system into a 'multi-party' and multiethnic political system. It underwent another change, from a centrally controlled government system into a decentralized administrative system, as a direct result of the newly constituted federal political system. Finally, Ethiopia made a radical shift from a monolingual and monocultural policy of education and administration into a multilingual and multicultural system.

A multilingual policy is understood as a way of mechanism to solve the cultural and linguistic hegemony of one group in relation to others. It is believed that multilingualism is the best way of solving the long-standing nationality questions of the right to use languages and recognize cultures for any purpose people wish.

WASLI report on Ethiopian sign language

For WASLI (World Association of Sign Language Interpreters) 2007 international conference in Segovia, Spain, countries were asked to provide a report on the situation in their country. Information that was thought to be useful was included. The questions asked were: "What is the population of your country? How many deaf people are there? Is the indigenous sign language recognized as an official language in the country? How many sign language interpreters are there? Are there a National Association of Sign Language Interpreters and what training facilities are there? What are your future goals? How can WASLI assist you and how can you

assist WASLI?"

According to Cleaver (2005:7), the case of Ethiopia was stated as follows:

The exact figures are difficult to come by regarding the number of deaf people in Ethiopia. However, it is roughly estimated that up to 1 million persons with hearing impairment live across the country. A National Association of the deaf has been in existence for three decades. But the size of its membership is extremely limited, numbering no more than 5000. The country has so far not issued and adopted a disability specific policy and legislation, which ensures the legal protection and respect of the rights of the local disability community in general, much less for the deaf in particular. Education of the deaf in Ethiopia dates back to the 1970s reported to have been introduced by American Missionaries. Despite nearly 40 years of history, the state of deaf education is still in a poor state; only a dozen of deaf schools operate throughout the country, and serve a combined student population of a few thousand. Amharic is the official working language of the nation, with English also being used as a language of instruction and communication in higher educational institutions and international organizations and business enterprises. The Amharic Sign Language that has been in use is based on American Sign, which means that it does not fully reflect the indigenous cultural, social and linguistic characteristics.

It is unfortunate that, regardless of the existing huge size of deaf population, the sign language interpreting service remains small, with no more than 40 interpreters known to be operating countrywide. As a result, it has taken a long time to create an association of sign language interpreters.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

This study was conducted in some selected towns of Ethiopia namely, Jimma, Addis Ababa, Nekemte and Hosa'na. These study areas are situated at different regions of the country, where the level of sign language educational accessibility for the deaf is not expected to be uniform and the analysis of the dialectal varieties of Ethiopian sign language could be more feasible. In each study site, deaf schools are launched and managed by different governmental and nongovernmental institutions which may be a cause for the educational accessibility differences. For example; the variety of Ethiopian sign language used by Deaf Association Members in Addis Ababa is more accessible to education than the varieties of Ethiopian sign language used by other deaf communities in Hosaina, Jimma and Nekemte. In addition to this, there are also separate deaf schools in which only deaf students are taught and special education for deaf children along with the hearing students in the selected study sites. By the reasons mentioned above, the study areas were selected by the researcher purposively.

Sample and sampling techniques

The number of participants included in this study was 400 deaf

students, 12 teachers of the deaf and available officials of educational bureaus from different study sites. From each study area, there were 50 (fifty) deaf students who were selected based on random sampling method and participated as direct informants of the study. Participants in Addis Ababa were selected randomly from four different deaf schools; and in Jimma, Nekemte and Hosaina, participants were selected from two, three and one deaf schools respectively based on the number of schools existing in each study site. Deaf children who were not yet able to have access to the sign language education and their family in all study sites were also selected using sampling and snowball methods.

Methods of data collection

In this study, the data were collected through interview by the help of interpreters in general. It was also mandatory to have interpreters for the study so as to make communication possible with deaf community at different study sites. By the fact that informants of different study sites can communicate only with the sign dialect of their respective region, the availability of interpreters at each study area was vital. Therefore, so as to make communication possible and collect data from deaf community at Jimma, Addis Ababa, Nekemte and Hosaina towns, two interpreters for each site (8 interpreters in total) were used. The researcher believes that he was successful in interviewing all the respondents. Concerned governmental and non-governmental bodies were also participated on the study through focus group discussion on whether there is awareness, plan, or possible challenges in realizing deaf community education. At all study sites, deaf school directors and administrators and Zonal and District Administrators participated on the focus group discussion.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Even though the data discussed in the study are worth studying, under this section, the researcher has presented only the summary of the data analyzed so as to make the manuscript size more manageable

How did you come to the deaf school you are currently attending?

According to the responses given from majority students, they were taken to the schools by their parents and relatives who are taking care of them. And others responded that they were informed by other deaf peers who they met in mosque while worshipping. The number of the students in each deaf class was 27-16. When the students' education grade increases, the number of the students in each grade decreases. Moreover, what the teachers of these schools told us is also similar with what deaf students of the school did. According to the teachers, the students came to the schools through their parents and relatives who were aware of the existence of deaf education and sign language.

In Nekemte, Eastern Wollega Zone, there are three primary schools that teach deaf students up to grade four. The schools are: Mekane Yesus School for the Deaf, Nekemte Church of Christ School for the Deaf and

Nekemte Primary School. The first two schools are non-governmental deaf schools that teach the deaf and the third one is a governmental primary school that teaches the deaf by arranging special/unit class in school.

In Addis Ababa, there are 10 schools recognized by the city's educational bureau, which gives sign-language teaching and training for deaf children from pre-school to high school. As per our observation of the site, the schools are three governmental schools that teach from pre-school to grade four, three governmental schools that teach from pre-schools to grade eight and one governmental school that teaches from grade nine to ten. Others three schools are non-governmentally run and teach from pre-school to grade five in separate schools for the deaf. All schools of government in the city teach the deaf by arranging special class. There are on average 30-40 students in a class where no hired interpreters are in any school. Therefore, the researcher decided to visit one from governmental schools namely Menelik II Secondary School which teaches the deaf from Grades 9-10 as special class and another three from the non-governments namely Mekanisa School for the deaf which teaches the deaf from preschool to Grade 8, Akaki sub-city deaf school which teaches up to Grade four, and Yekatit 23 School in Mesalemia which teaches up to Grade 4.

Both the students and their teachers said that sometimes the deaf schools themselves make promotion on how they educate the deaf and encourage families of the children to send their children to school. In responding to the call from the schools, families of the children brought their children to the schools. On the other hand, teachers of the students told us that there is administrative supervision from side of 'kebele' men to encourage all the families send their children to school.

In Hossaina, there is one school that teaches deaf students at high school and vocational level. The school is run by Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus at Hossaina and the name of the school is 'Mekane Yesus School for the Deaf'. Mekane Yesus School for the Deaf is the only school in Ethiopia that teaches up to Grade 10 and Vocational training level. Deaf students at this school are attending Boarding School which is located in Hosaina. The deaf students and teachers report that everybody residing near the church that is running the school and few kilometers away from where the deaf school is launched knows that there is a deaf school and the deaf must go for education. Many deaf students were attending the school when the researcher was there for interview.

Do you know other children who are unable to hear and/or speak and have not gone to school yet?

According to responses from the schools' teachers, there are deaf children who have not come to school yet. The

teachers said the information is not from recorded formal document, but informal. The interpreters and the researcher have met some children on the street, with shoe shiners, whom they could not communicate with, as they were unable to understand the local sign language which the deaf students of the town use. They can communicate only with their deaf peers. We also tried to meet with some families of the deaf children near the schools and finally succeeded in communicating with three families, having one deaf son each. These families did not send their sons to either school as they presumed that their children are not able to communicate with hearing community out of home. According to these families, there are many deaf children in the town whose family are not willing to let them go out of home due to fear that their children may be harmed with anything in the environment. They continued telling us that nobody, including the kebele administrators and the teachers as well, has ever told them to take their children to school. Some families were even emotional when telling us that among Jimma municipality officials, zone educational bureau, or school teachers, nobody was able to tell them if there is any school or special program for deaf children in the town, Jimma.

The same question was asked teachers of the deaf both at Nekemte Church of Christ and Nekemte Primary School. The teachers told us that even though they are unable to guess how many deaf children are there in the town with no access of education, it is a fact that there are more children with no education than children with education in the town. Many of the deaf students learning in Nekemte Church of Christ were from Nekemte Mekane Yesus Hostel that receives children with no family or supporter. In Nekemte Primary School, only deaf children close to the school are pursuing their education by the help of their parents. We could communicate with those parents whether they know children with same case with their own in their neighborhood.

In Addis Ababa and Hossaina, the teachers said there are many children who they know and have not come to schools for the deaf yet. The teachers told us that it is not because of ignorance of deaf schools' availability in the towns that the children do not come to school, but many of the children in Addis Ababa are homeless and helpless.

Are there schools for the deaf outside your town in which deaf students are taught in sign language?

This question was first forwarded to officials of educational bureau of Jimma zone. According to the officials, there are two schools at woreda level. One at Agaro, Agaro Primary School which teaches up to grade four as a special class/unit in a government school and the other in Yebu, Yebu Primary School which teaches students with hearing difficulty up to grade four by arranging special class/unit in a government school. However, the officials replied to the question in such a way that no

formal school for deaf children in rural area of the zone is available even though existence of children residents with hearing impairment and even mute deaf children in that area is undeniable. They do not know the figure of the children and could not even guess. They tried to explain why separate schools as special program/unit for the deaf are not yet realized so as to make education accessible for the deaf. One, there is no nationally or regionally initiated and formally communicated plan from regional level down to the zone level educational bureaus. Principally, formal education needs curriculum, text book, content syllabus and the like. Where all these required materials are insufficient and readily not at hand, formal education will be inaccessible and inconsistent to the intention planned for. Second, there are no qualified teachers at all who can teach the deaf children either in the local sign language which the deaf children are communicating with or in Ethiopian sign language, which mean in is signed Amharic.

Officials of educational bureaus from Nekemte and Hossaina have also told us that there are no formal schools built for deaf educating purpose in rural area near the two towns. This is the reason that the officials raised for their responses were similar with respondents from Jimma did. There is no special point from these two towns to discuss here.

From very recent time onwards, the current Ethiopian government has been striving to expand educational accessibility to make first cycle education coverage becomes hundred percent. Accordingly, in Ethiopia, currently the first cycle education is being built at each kebele level so as to enable every child in rural area and urban as well have access to education at a very low cost. However, besides such a long vision strategy of the government in respect of education, another segment of the citizens, the deaf, is being marginalized unconsciously.

What is the educational approach you are using for communicating with deaf children and students in your deaf school?

The teachers of the deaf children told us that there are no centrally designed teaching materials available and distributed to where deaf education is on start level. What they have at hand and using it for deaf education of all level is only one book which was published in 1963 E.C. and nothing is added to it until now. By the fact that they do not consider themselves as well qualified professionals of Ethiopian sign language, signed Amharic, and the knowledge gap they have on the subject, most of the time they do not need to focus on it. Even though that much knowledge gap and challenging situation is there with educating the deaf at Jimma, the teachers told us that they teach the deaf in their school in signs, oral, gesture and with facial expressions.

Teachers from Nekemte site responded to the question

that they teach the deaf in their schools by using signs, oral, gesture and facial expressions. They told us that they do not have centrally and formally distributed teaching materials which may guarantee students at different regions to learn the same sign language, so that one can understand the other. The teachers have no skill or have not been trained in Ethiopian sign language but they are those who were trained in special need program which may comprise hearing difficulty as one case. According to teachers from Addis Ababa and Hossaina, the case is not different from what we heard from others. They told us that children are taught in sign, oral, gesture and facial expressions. What makes both sites different from others is that their schools have teaching materials that are prepared at regional level starting from lower level to any additional grade. Especially, Minilik II Secondary School in Addis Ababa is the only school that receives and teaches students from all governmental and nongovernmental primary schools. Mekane Yesus School for the Deaf at Hossaina also has teaching materials that are prepared centrally by ENAD (Ethiopian National Association of the Deaf) and Mekane Yesus Church to teach deaf students up to grade 10 and vocational level.

Do the deaf in your school can hear/understand the Ethiopian Sign language broadcasted on ETV?

This question was asked to identify whether sign language the deaf students and their teachers are using locally is similar with the Ethiopian sign language, which is traditionally presumed to be the standardized and nationally accepted language of all Ethiopian's deaf as a whole. It is clear that the Ethiopian television provides sign language services for news and sometimes allows transmission of significant themes for the deaf with the length of time ranged between a half hour news release once a week, to a daily thirty-minute news program from Monday to Friday. Even though the air coverage allowed to broadcast some significant topics in sign language is very crucial to effective deaf community serves and to bring the deaf community closer to information, a fundamental issue need to be addressed by this study will be identifying the Ethiopian sign language being used whether or not it is understandable by all the deaf in different parts of the country. Based on the question provided to them, teachers of the deaf at Jimma and Nekemte towns confirmed that deaf students of their schools could not hear/understand the programs that broadcasted on ETV. I also questioned the deaf students if they can understand or catch the programs transmitted in Ethiopian sign language. The students also told us that they do not always understand the meanings of the signs and they are often confused of why and what makes them not to understand the signs on ETV sign language program. What was staggering to us during the interview is that the teachers themselves cannot sign and understand Ethiopian sign language in correct manner.

The fact that teachers of the sign language in both schools are not professionals in Ethiopian sign language and teaching sign language with less training experiences, it is difficult to judge on both the deaf students and their teachers for their inability to communicate in Ethiopian sign language. Ethiopian sign language uses signs that have its origin in American Sign Language and uses Amharic alphabetic manuals for figure spelling and representation of different signs. This feature of the language could have some indications for the signers far from the centre of the country. One thing, signers who started signing after they had known another spoken language rather than Amharic will face difficulty in understanding the signed Amharic. Second, signers who are completely mute are expected to learn two things; one the knowledge of the language and the alphabets the language is written by. Deaf students who reside in the country sides, especially in Oromia region, could not understand Amharic language as the language is not mother tongue/first language for many of them. Therefore, even though ETV broadcasts in Ethiopian sign language on the air coverage allowed for Ethiopian deaf community, the deaf students in different parts of the country, especially those in Jimma and Nekemte, are not mutually intelligible with Ethiopian sign language signers. Students and teachers from Addis Ababa and Hossaina told us that they can understand sign language that is broadcasted by ETV. The teachers at both schools are graduates of Ethiopian sign language from Addis Ababa University and also have got different trainings on deaf education and Ethiopian sign languages.

What is the professional qualification of deaf teachers in your school?

This question was a question to Jimma and Nekemte town educational bureaus directors. The directors told us that they have teachers in their some primary schools who teach students with different kinds of difficulties. To mention the current figure of teachers in each school of the sites, in Hirmata primary school two teachers, in Mandara primary school one teacher, in Mekane Yesus School for the Deaf two teachers, in Nekemte Church of Christ School for the Deaf two teachers and in Nekemte Primary School one teacher teaches students with all kinds of difficulties. According to the directors, the teachers are not graduates of any college but they have got some training on special need education. The directors told us that they have doubt on the competency of the teacher in teaching sign language perfectly as the teachers have not been trained quite enough to teach only sign language rather just to support all kinds of students with any kinds of difficulty. In Addition to this, according to the directors, the number of the teachers in each school is insignificant when taking into account the community who are in need of those kinds of teachers. They added that they have a plan to expand the ceiling

level of the grade for students with difficulties, which is up to grade four now, to grade five in year 2007, but they do not think that they will be effective of their plan as of lack of human resource who can teach. The researcher asked them if they tried to find sign language graduate teachers from Addis Ababa University. But the directors responded that they do not have any mandate to hire teachers for their schools at zone level. Teachers will be sent being hired from the center.

When we summarize responses from directors of Educational Bureaus of Addis Ababa and Hossaina, some teachers of their schools are graduates of Ethiopian sign language from Addis Ababa University and some others are graduates of special need education from other colleges. The number of teachers is also more than two in each school and sometimes they go from Addis Ababa to Hossaina to train teachers and teach students.

Is there any paid or voluntary sign language interpreter in your school?

Whenever education of deaf community and sign language rose as point of discussion, the importance and centrality of sign language interpreters is unquestionable. In developing countries like Ethiopia, the way through which information transmitted from the deaf to the hearing and the vice versa is interpretation. Unless interpreters sign to the deaf what is said by the hearing and tell orally to the hearing what the deaf signs, the possibility of communication would be impossible. Particularly, interpretation in education is very essential so as to make knowledge transferability bidirectional. Since most of the schools having special class for the deaf are educating the students up to grade four and in each school the number of the teachers is very few, the share of hearing teachers in teaching some subject would be obligatory. However, the knowledge of sign language of most hearing teachers in turn may be insufficient to enable the deaf understands the subject matter. Therefore, the importance of interpreters in supporting such tough aspects of deaf education needs to be focused on. This was the reason for taking into account and asked both Jimma and Nekemte educational bureaus directors the question regarding sign language interpreters. The directors replied that they have not either hired or voluntary sign language interpreters in both sites. The teachers by themselves try to cover lessons to be taught and sometimes help in interpretation if in case others want to contact with the deaf. In case of Addis Ababa and Hossaina, there are both voluntary and hired interpreters available in many schools.

What challenges do you think are there with deaf community education using sign language in your school?

This was very essential question to the directors of the

schools, zonal education bureaus, deaf teachers, and the deaf students all at the end of our interviews. According to the responses from all, the followings are some of the challenges that contributed to late establishment of deaf schools, inaccessibility of education by the deaf as well, and inability for offering sign language interpreting services in some schools:

1. Lack of knowledge on the issues surrounding deaf education.
2. Lack of trained/skilled individuals in the profession of sign Language teaching and interpreting area.
3. There is no sign language teaching resources prepared at regional level which is very essential for the deaf education at local level.
4. Lack of research on sign language and sign language interpreting to inform and guide policy makers.
5. Lack of knowledge on how many deaf children are there in some towns and marginalizing them in education.
6. No special attention was given to deaf education than special need education given to all children with learning difficulties in general.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on data gathered from the selected study sites and the result of analysis, the researcher draws up conclusion as follows.

There is information gap in Jimma and Nekemte sites on the availability of deaf schools in their respective towns even though the schools are not enough to accommodate all the deaf in those towns. In case of awareness of the issue raised here Addis Ababa and Hossaina are better especially on what is expected from the schools in making promotion.

The figure of deaf students who are currently attending their education at different schools are very less when compared with those who have not got access to education yet. Besides, the number of schools in each study sites, except Addis Ababa, is insignificant if the situation of all the deaf in the sites allows them to go to schools.

There is no single school or special class arranged for deaf children at rural area except at some woreda towns. This situation can tell us that a great number of deaf children are marginalized not to have access to education even at first cycle education.

Even though much knowledge gap and challenging situation is there with educating the deaf at all sites, the teachers have kept teaching the deaf by local signs, oral, gesture and with facial expressions the students understand. However, there is a strong challenging situation with the absence of uniform teaching material centrally and formally distributed to the schools. The researcher believes that the availability of uniform teaching materials may help students at different regions to learn the same

sign language so that student in one region can understand student in another region.

Deaf children and even their teachers at Jimma and Nekemte sites are unable to understand the Ethiopian sign language broadcasted on Ethiopian Television. All deaf students in these sites communicate and learning with local sign language of their respective regions.

Sign language teachers, especially in Jimma and Nekemte, are not teaching Ethiopian sign language as they are less qualified for it. But they are teaching local sign language which is mutually understandable to the teachers and students. There is even no sign language interpreter at these sites either being hired or giving voluntary service in general.

In general terms, the following are some areas of difficulties in educating deaf children of the study sites:

Lack of knowledge on the issues surrounding deaf education.

Lack of trained/skilled individuals in the profession of sign language teaching and interpreting area.

There is no sign Language teaching resources prepared at regional level which is very essential for the deaf education at local level.

Lack of research on sign language and sign language interpreting to inform and guide policy makers.

Lack of knowledge on how many deaf children are there in some towns and marginalizing them in education.

No special attention is given to deaf education than special need education given to all children with learning difficulties in general.

As a researcher of language related problems, he strongly recommends things that the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) Commission recommended regarding deaf education and sign language as follows,

That sign language should be recognized and treated as the first language of a deaf child and he/she must learn modern education using it in Ethiopia.

Besides Ethiopian sign language, children must learn modern education by their own local sign language. To this end, materials and dictionaries must be prepared for the deaf by taking into account the local language and the culture the children are brought up with.

Institutes that train teacher professionals for educating students with learning disabilities must give attention particularly to deaf community and work on producing interpreters for deaf education.

In order for the deaf children to acquire their first language early and with full fluency, they must be guaranteed the right to be exposed to sign language early in life, in an environment which includes highly skilled signers.

Sign language teaching programs should be established and further developed for parents and personnel working with deaf children.

ENAD must work to enable children living at rural area have access to education as it does for children in urban.

From government side, funds must be provided for advanced training on sign language research, so that adequate numbers of deaf researchers can be available.

This research did not include government officials beyond zonal administrators as the study participants. Therefore, extensive research which includes the participation of educational policy makers is very important.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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