

Perceptual dynamics of striving to make children with hearing impairment speak in education.

Chingombe Shamiso Iline and Dr Magwa Simuforosa

Great Zimbabwe University Box 1235 Masvingo Zimbabwe

Abstract

The study focused on participants' views over striving to make children with hearing impairment speak in education. In Zimbabwe the official language of children with hearing impairment is sign language, while hearing individuals use an aural-auditory language. Some measures are being put in place to ensure that the hearing impaired child adopts the hearing culture. As a result, they are coerced to adopt both the hearing and the deaf cultures. A qualitative methodology was used through an interpretive research paradigm. A sample of 10 hearing impaired pupils, 5 teachers and 5 parents was purposively selected. Questionnaires and interviews were used to solicit data from the participants. Data were analysed using thematic data analysis. Mixed perceptions were highlighted by the research participants. Some participants argued that it was a noble idea to encourage the child with hearing impairment to speak. Their argument was that this will allow them to fit well in the larger community which is a hearing one. Other participants felt that coercing children with hearing impairment to talk is against the will of the Creator. The children with hearing impairment felt that this is creating some confusion. They indicated that they are quite comfortable in the Deaf culture. However, some expressed that they are eager to leave their marginal society. The researcher recommended that both cultures co-exist. Children with hearing impairment should be at liberty to use the language that they are comfortable with.

Keywords: hearing impaired, perceptual dynamics, restrictive language, sign language, interpretive, significant other

Background

The language children are exposed to is crucial to how they perceive and interpret their experiences (Andrews, Leigh & Weiner, 2004). Many deaf children raised in speech-only

environments receive little to no accessible language (Humphries, Kushalnagar, Mathur, Napoli, Padden, Rathmann & Smith, 2012). Language is essential to the cognitive development of human beings. The way people think is influenced by their language acquisition. Children need to be well versed with their language because a lack of language means no knowledge is adopted. Santrock (2014) also argues that the first four years of development influence the later ones in life development. Essentially, the child is supposed to acquire sign language at an early age so that they will not become confused when sign language is introduced later in life. Failure to acquire a first language in the early years might lead to children lacking proficiency in any language (Arends, 2009). Most parents of deaf children are encouraged to communicate with their children from the beginning only in spoken language (Humphries, Kushalnagar, Mathur, Napoli, Padden & Rathmann, 2014).

Language substantiates the way we perceive and interpret things (Bhatia & Ritchie, 2007). Principally, language determines thought processes. Language proficiency gives one an upper hand in concept formation as compared to those with restrictive language (Banda, Chivore, Zindi, Muchenje, Hapanyengwi, Nehowe & Chikoto, 2014; Mangal, 2002). This substantiates the view that language determines the way people think. A child who is not proficient in his or her own language seems to have some restrictions in the way he or she faces the world. Language is perceived as a servant of thought used to express thoughts already in existence (Klaudia, 2013). Thus, thought determines one's language (Barker, 2000).

Language acts as a grid through which the speaker of a language expresses his or her perceptions and interpretations of the world (Austad, 2009). There are clear indications that teachers do not teach pupils how to think but they aid or assist pupils to think by giving them something to think about (Borich & Tombari, 2003). Sign language skills are essential in successful communication among people with hearing impairment, but sign language is used and understood by rather few people (Krammer and Klaudia, 2013). In addition, the challenge is that sign language is not universal among all nations. The regional variants lead to problems of understanding (Bhatia & Ritchie, 2007). For instance, there is American and Zimbabwean sign language. There are some variations between these two languages which might cause confusion. Interacting with a signing

community enhances proper development of language among children with hearing impairment (Humphries et al., 2014).

The primary home language for most children with hearing impairment is spoken language (Chingombe & Chitumba, 2013). A child's ability to successfully acquire sign language calls for a scaffold of proficient language users. Parents are often told that the best way for their child to acquire spoken language is to raise them using sign language (Humphries et al., 2014). Additionally, not meeting the language needs of children with hearing impairment implies harm to their social interaction, introduces behavioural problems and perpetuates depression among them (Leigh, 2009; Humphries et al., 2014; Bhatia & Ritchie, 2007).

Deaf children of deaf parents learning sign language are just as systematic, regular, and productive in their language as are hearing children, that is, a deaf child's linguistic progression through stages is similar to that of a hearing child learning spoken language (Tomaszewski, 2001). Thus, being deaf isn't an obstacle for language acquisition (Tomaszewski, 2001). Remediation is enhanced by use of home sign language utterances which contain pointing and gestures as a way of communicating. Notably, the challenge is that most pupils with hearing impairment are from families who have no experience or knowledge of the deaf community (Chingombe & Chitumba, 2013). The researchers noted that there were some children who had difficulties in communicating using sign language. This prompted them to carry out the study to note perceptual dynamics of striving to make children with hearing impairment speak.

Theoretical framework

Mwamwenda (2010) believed that language develops from social interactions, for communication purposes. According to Vygotsky much important learning by the child occurs through social interaction with skillful tutors or significant others (Feldman, 2009). This reflects that one's way of life is influenced by the people with whom they associate (Chingombe & Chitumba, 2013). If those with hearing impairment communicate in sign language their

communication skills, values, morals, behaviour and attitudes will be glorified by the culture they live in (Tompkins, 2004).

According to Snowman, McCown and Biehler (2009) Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development is often referred to as socio-cultural theory because it maintains that how we think is a function of both social and cultural forces. Since language is a reservoir of culture, one can suggest that learners be accorded the right to learn using their first languages in schools. The views of Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Whorf are also going to guide this study. Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis states that there are certain thoughts of an individual in one language that cannot be understood by those who live in another language. This clearly indicates that people from the hearing culture cannot clearly understand the values and thoughts of people from the deaf culture. The hypothesis states that the way people think is strongly affected by their native languages (Mooney et al., 2011). Edward Sapir was an anthropological linguist who believed language is a guide to social reality. Conversely, Benjamin Lee Whorf was an amateur linguist who argued that there are some connections between language and thought or behaviour (Mooney et al., 2011). Thus, language influences the way individuals think. As a result one is supposed to be eloquent with his or her own language.

Research methodology

The researchers used a qualitative research approach through an interpretivist paradigm. The aim of interpretative phenomenological analysis is to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world (Smith & Osborn, 2007; Snape & Spencer, 2003). The research participants outlined their views on the use of sign language. The approach was phenomenological in that it involved detailed examination of the participants' life world; it attempted to explore personal experience and was concerned with an individual's personal perception or account of an object or event (Rule & Vaughn, 2011). The researchers took an active role in getting closer to the participant's personal world. People attribute different meanings to their social environment. Accordingly, interpretive phenomenological analysis is concerned with trying to understand what it is like, from the point of view of the participants, to

take their side (Denscombe, 2010). The participants' perceptions on the use of sign language were solicited by the researchers. Interpretive researchers need to gain and maintain good access to appropriate organizations for their fieldwork (Matthew & Sutton, 2004). Interpretive studies assume that people create and associate their own subjective and inter subjective meanings as they interact with the world around them (Creswell, 2007). A sample of twenty pupils with hearing impairment, five teachers and ten parents were purposively sampled. Data was collected through questionnaires and interviews. Interviews were conducted with teachers and parents. Questionnaires were used to solicit data from the pupils with hearing impairment. Data was analysed through a thematic data analysis.

Research results and discussion

The findings from the study showed that some controversial issues were raised by the participants. Fifteen students with hearing impairment revealed that they are now confused. They indicated that the home language used by their parents differs from theirs. They noted that most of their parents or guardians use the spoken language. This concurs with Chingombe and Chitumba (2013)'s findings that the primary home language for most hearing impaired individuals is spoken language. Some participants complained that this creates confusion on their part. They pointed out that they were enjoying being at school where they were mixing with colleagues from their same culture. They argued that proposing for the eradication of sign language is an infringement of their rights. Two respondents noted that they want someone to protest against this proposal on their behalf. Their argument was that if they are forced to speak, whose wish are they vying for. Is it the Creator's wish or humankind's wish? Five respondents pointed out that they are in a comfort zone. Three participants argued that if they learn the oral language it would become difficult to communicate with their deaf parents who do not have this oral language when they get back home. Some participants complained that curricula seem to be biased towards the hearing child. They also indicated that since most of their teachers are from the hearing culture they are sidelining them.

Ten respondents revealed that one of their parents is deaf and the other one is not. They noted that the hearing parents seem to be dominating in their families. As a result the parent from the hearing culture tended to focus more attention on their hearing siblings. However, somehow they

were rejoicing because they could communicate fully with one of their parents from the same culture. They were arguing that the sign being used at home is at par with what they were being taught at school.

Some parents were applauding the proposal to enable the children with hearing impairments to join the hearing. Their argument was that since they have some challenges in using the sign language their problems will be ironed out by enabling their children to join their cultures. Eight out of the ten parents interviewed revealed that they are not conversant with the sign language. They admitted to having a hard time communicating with their own children. They blamed themselves for being unable to communicate with their own kids. They argued that they have travelled a long journey with their children yet there is no total communication. They felt that this avenue of letting their children speak was going to make life easier for them. One parent was quoted saying, *“If I am able to communicate with my own children I will be more than happy. You really do not know how painful it is my daughter when you cannot plan or instruct your own kid to do what you want him to do. You know what pains me most is that my own kid finds pleasure in being at school than with his own family. He blames us for being unable to communicate with him. This will restore the attachment we had lost to our own child.”*

The above response supports the Whorf Hypothesis which states that there are certain thoughts of an individual in one language that cannot be understood by those who live in another language. Once there is this disharmony in communication there is bound to be some conflicts among people. The conflict has been clearly indicated by the respondent quoted above. One participant indicated that having children with hearing impairments join their hearing counterparts will help to reduce the vulnerability of the hearing impaired. She pointed out that some of these kids are prone to abuse. Her argument was that at times society takes advantage of them and ends up sexually abusing the kids. The fact that there is no communication means the victims are not able to report such cases. The issue of empowering those with hearing impairments will not be totally achieved since there is a communication barrier. The participant was arguing that no one in the outside world is prepared to absorb these kids to engage them in

stable and secure jobs. This is why you find most of them selling goods in the street, because they will be doing it on their own since they will not report to anyone.

Some teachers applauded the programme to enable the deaf child to speak. They pointed out that some parents are coming to school complaining that they do not understand what their children are saying during the holiday. Their suggestion was that once the pupils are taught the oral language this will enhance total communication between the parents and their own children. However, their major complaint was on the issue of remuneration. They wanted to be paid for this programme. They pointed out that the programme coordinators should pay them for the extra mile they are going in trying to make this a success. They also pointed out that there is need to see to it that advanced technology is provided to them since most of the pupils with hearing impairments are from disadvantaged families. One teacher said, there is need to have the modern and advanced FM system that controls sound. The FM system helps to eliminate all other sounds so that the child hears and focusses on what the teacher is saying. The other disadvantage is that there is no continuity in this programme. The programme is targeting the primary level. The moment they move to secondary school they will be asked to sign again.

One of the teachers argued that not all pupils are going to benefit from this programme. The argument was that there are pupils with mild, moderate and profound hearing impairments. What it means is that the ones with profound impairments are not going to benefit at all.

The researcher noted that in a bid to try to assist the parents to communicate with their own children another gap will be created. As highlighted by one of the teachers there is need to implement this sparingly as there are pupils with mild, moderate and profound hearing impairments. This means the programme is not meant to benefit all the children.

Conclusions

The researchers concluded that there is need to ensure that both parties are catered for. Eliminating the sign language would mean that the children with hearing impairment are considered to be outcasts. They are of the opinion that there is need to ensure that parents are taught how to use sign language so that there is total communication between the parents and their children. There is also need to teach the community basic sign language so that when the children mix with the hearing people there won't be any challenges for the two parties to communicate.

References

- Alverson, M. and Karrenman, D. (2011). *Qualitative research and theory development: Mystery as method*. Sage Publication Ltd: London.
- Arends, R.I. (2009). *Learning to teach, 8th Edition*. McGraw Hill: New York.
- Austad, C.S. (2009). *Counselling and psychotherapy today: Theory, practice and research*. New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education.
- Banda. A. M , Chivore. R. S, Zindi. F, Muchenje. F, Hapanyengwi.O, Nehowe.P and Chikoto.S , (2014).Theory of Education: Diploma in Education (Primary) Open and Distance Learning. Harare: University of Zimbabwe.
- Barker, S.B. (2000). *School counseling for the Twenty-first century, 3rd Edition*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall
- Bhatia, T.K. and Ritchie, W.C. (2007). *The handbook of bilingualism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Borich, G.D. and Tombari, M.L. (2003). *Educational psychology: A contemporary approach*. New York: Longman.
- Chingombe, S.I. and Chitumba, W. (2013). “A survey of opinions of major stakeholders regarding the feasibility and necessity for the hearing impaired child to speak.” *International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)*, India Online ISSN: pp. 2319-7064.
- Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Denscombe, M. (2010). *The good research guide for small scale social research projects, 4th Edition*. London: McGraw Hill Companies.
- Donald, D., Lazarus, S. and Lolwana, P. (2010). *Educational psychology in social context: Ecosystemic applications in Southern Africa, 4th Edition*. Cape Town: Oxford University.

- Humphries, T., Kushalnagar, P., Mathur, G., Napoli, D.J., Padden, C. and Rathmann, C. (2014). "Ensuring language acquisition for the deaf: What linguists can do." *Linguistic Society of America Language*, 90(2), June 2014, pp. e31-e52.
- Humphries, T., Kushalnagar, P., Mathur, G., Napoli, D.J., Padden, C., Rathmann, C., and Smith, S.R. (2012). "Language acquisition for deaf children: Reducing the harms of zero tolerance to the use of alternative approaches." *Harm Reduction Journal*, BioMedic Central The Open Access Publisher, Published online 2012 Apr 2. doi: 10.1186/1477-7517-9-16.
- Krammer Klaudia, M.A. (2013). "The benefits of sign language for deaf children with and without cochlear implant(s)." *European Scientific Journal*, December 2013 /SPECIAL/ edition vol.4 ISSN: 1857 - 7881 (Print) e - ISSN 1857- 7431.
- Leigh, I. W. (2009). *Identity and deafness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mangal, S.K. (2002). *Advanced educational psychology*. New Delhi: Prentice-Hall of India.
- Matthew, D. and Sutton, C.D. (2004). *Social research: The basics*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Rule, P. and Vaughn, J. (2011). *Your guide to case study research*. Johannesburg: Van Schaik Publishers.
- Santrock. J.W (2011) *Educational Psychology* 5th Edition. New York, McGraw-Hill.
- Snowman, J. and Biehler, R.F. (2000). *Psychology applied to teaching*. New York: Houghton and Mifflin Company.
- Tomaszewski, P. (2001). "Sign language development in young deaf children." *Psychology of Language and Communication*, 5(1).
- Tuckman, B.W. and Monetti, D.M. (2011). *Educational psychology*. Wadsworth Cengage Learning, USA.