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Bilingualism and Biculturalism: The Impact of Sign Language and Spoken Language Acquisition on Deaf Identity Formation

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Abstract

Bilingualism and biculturalism play a crucial role in shaping the identity of deaf individuals, particularly through the acquisition of both sign language and spoken language. This paper explores how fluency in these two languages influences the formation of deaf identity, focusing on the intersection of linguistic competence and cultural affiliation. Sign language is deeply tied to Deaf culture, providing a strong sense of community and belonging for deaf individuals. On the other hand, spoken language proficiency opens doors to mainstream opportunities, fostering engagement with the hearing world. The acquisition of both languages allows deaf individuals to navigate between Deaf and hearing cultures, often resulting in a bicultural identity. However, this process can also lead to challenges, such as identity conflicts and a sense of isolation if one language is favored over the other. The paper examines the cognitive, social, and emotional benefits of bilingualism, as well as the complexities of balancing these two languages. It also highlights the importance of educational strategies and policies that support both sign language and spoken language acquisition to foster a well-rounded identity. By promoting linguistic and cultural inclusivity, this paper argues that bilingualism and biculturalism are essential in shaping a positive and empowered deaf identity, allowing individuals to thrive in both Deaf and hearing communities.

Keywords: Bilingualism, Biculturalism, Deaf identity, Sign language acquisition, Spoken language acquisition, Identity formation,

Introduction

In Nigeria, a nation with diverse linguistic and cultural landscapes, integrating sign language into the General Studies curriculum of tertiary institutions represents a significant step toward fostering inclusivity and enhancing communication among students. Despite the country's rich cultural tapestry, deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals often face challenges in accessing educational and social opportunities due to communication barriers. By including sign language in the General Studies curriculum, tertiary institutions can contribute to creating a more inclusive academic environment where all students, regardless of their hearing ability, have equal opportunities to participate and succeed. This initiative not only supports the rights of deaf individuals but also enriches the educational experience for all students by promoting broader communication skills and cultural understanding. Deaf identity formation is a multifaceted process influenced by various factors,

including language acquisition and cultural exposure. Bilingualism, the ability to use two languages proficiently, and biculturalism, the integration of multiple cultural identities, are critical in shaping deaf individuals' self-concept. This paper examines how acquiring both sign language and spoken language impacts deaf identity, exploring the roles of cultural and linguistic factors.

Bilingualism and Deaf Identity

Bilingualism in the context of deaf individuals often involves the use of sign language and spoken language (Miller, 2016). The interaction between these languages can influence how deaf individuals perceive themselves and their place in the world. Theories of bilingualism, such as the additive and subtractive bilingualism models (Cummins, 2000), provide a foundation for understanding these dynamics.

Biculturalism and Deaf Identity

Biculturalism refers to the integration of two distinct cultural identities (Phinney, 2003). For deaf individuals, this often involves navigating both Deaf culture and mainstream hearing culture. The concept of bicultural identity is crucial for understanding how deaf individuals blend aspects of both cultures into their self-concept (Glickman, 2009).

Understanding Bilingualism and Biculturalism in Terms of Deaf Language Acquisition.

Recognizing the distinct linguistic and cultural milieu that Deaf people navigate is essential to understanding bilingualism and biculturalism in the context of deaf language acquisition. For Deaf people, being bilingual usually means learning both spoken/written languages, like English, and sign languages, like American Sign Language (ASL). According to studies, early exposure to sign language supports Deaf children's cognitive and linguistic development, even if they eventually acquire a spoken language later (Petitto *et al*., 2001). Sign language serves as a natural language base, fostering language development while offering access to a cultural identity rooted in the Deaf

community. This dual language development is often shaped by the individual's exposure to both Deaf and hearing communities, necessitating fluency in languages that function differently in terms of modality visual-gestural versus oral-auditory.

Biculturalism emphasizes the interactions between Deaf people and the larger hearing society, which is a complement to bilingualism. Deaf people frequently move between hearing culture, which may place more emphasis on spoken language and auditory norms, and deaf culture, which prioritizes sign language and shared experiences of being deaf. Although navigating two different cultures enhances their social identity, it can also provide difficulties, particularly in settings that value spoken language or are unaware of Deaf culture. For example, Deaf people may feel excluded in settings where most people are hearing, especially if their preferred language is not followed (Grosjean, 2010). On the other hand, the Deaf community offers a cultural framework that promotes shared values and visual communication, which fosters a strong sense of identity.

For Deaf people learning a second language in a bilingual and bicultural setting, navigating language dominance and competency is also necessary. Deaf infants exposed to sign language from birth, particularly those of Deaf parents, frequently become fluent in sign language first, acquiring spoken language through literacy instruction or speech therapy thereafter (Mayberry & Kluender, 2017). Access to sign language may be delayed for offspring of hearing parents, which could impact the child's overall language development. According to research, it's critical to give Deaf kids early exposure to both languages so that their social and cognitive development can match their potential (Humphries *et al*., 2012). As a result, encouraging bilingualism and biculturalism calls for an all-encompassing strategy that respects sign language and offers strong assistance in acquiring the language that is most widely spoken and written.

Cognitive and Social Benefits of Sign Language Acquisition

Learning sign language improves one's cognitive and social abilities, as well as one's feeling of community and visual-spatial abilities Proficiency in sign language enables Deaf people to form a strong sense of self, marked by a close bond with the Deaf community and culture (Padden & Humphries, 2005). Learning sign language has substantial advantages for social and cognitive development, especially for hearing and deaf people. Studies reveal that mastering sign language improves cognitive functions like mental flexibility, memory, and visual-spatial processing (Bavelier *et al*., 2008). These abilities are explained by the brain's adaptation to controlling a language system based on visuals, which uses distinct cognitive pathways than spoken language. Learning sign language improves social relationships and cultural understanding between hearing and deaf people by promoting more inclusivity and communication in varied societies (Humphries *et al*., 2016). This welcoming connection lessens stigma and gives deaf people a sense of community within the larger community.

Impact of Sign Language Acquisition on Self-Perception

Being proficient in sign language can help deaf people have a better self-perception. It strengthens their ties to the Deaf community and fosters the growth of a robust Deaf identity (Cohen, 2002). Within the Deaf community, pride and a sense of belonging are fostered by this language and cultural immersion.

Learning sign language has a big impact on how Deaf people view themselves, which shapes their identity and social interactions. Being able to communicate effectively using sign language helps Deaf people feel empowered and a part of the Deaf community. Language is a crucial component of identity creation, according to Holcomb (2013), and learning sign language helps Deaf people communicate and maintain their cultural identity. Deaf people gain a greater sense of autonomy and self-worth as they interact with others in a

language that represents their actual experience. Their ability to communicate their ideas and feelings is strengthened by this learning, which is essential for having a good self-perception (Padden & Humphries, 2005).

On the other hand, Deaf people may experience feelings of inferiority or loneliness if they are unable to learn sign language or if their learning is delayed. Research indicates that Deaf children who are not exposed to sign language from an early age frequently experience communication hurdles that have a detrimental effect on their social identity and self-esteem (Schick, 2010). In a world where spoken language is frequently valued, these people may internalize feelings of inadequacy if they lack a strong communication mechanism. Thus, learning sign language early on is essential to helping Deaf people develop positive self-perceptions and enable them to fully engage in both hearing and Deaf communities (Marschark, 2007).

Spoken Language Acquisition: Challenges and Opportunities

For deaf people, learning spoken language poses particular difficulties, such as the requirement for specialized training and possible communication hurdles (Luckner & Muir, 2001). Speaking fluently, however, can make it easier to access mainstream resources and opportunities, which can improve one's chances for further education and employment (Marschark, 2007).

Influence on Deaf Identity

Spoken language learning has a variety of effects on deaf identity. According to Horn (2009), for certain individuals, it serves as a conduit to the general public and cultivates a dual identity that integrates their Deaf and hearing cultures. If not counterbalanced with proficient sign language abilities, it could cause others to feel cut off from Deaf culture (Wang, 2012).

Bicultural Experiences: Navigating Dual Cultures

Deaf people who are bicultural frequently move between hearing and Deaf cultures. A hybrid identity that combines aspects of both cultures may result from this encounter. The capacity to transition between these cultural

situations with ease can improve prospects for social engagement. Navigating bicultural experiences involves the complex interplay of blending traditions, values, and social norms from two distinct cultures, which can be both enriching and challenging. Individuals immersed in dual cultures often face identity negotiation, striving to maintain a sense of belonging to both cultural spheres while managing potential conflicts that arise from differing expectations (Berry, 2005). For instance, first-generation immigrants may balance the collectivist values of their heritage with the individualistic tendencies of their host culture, fostering resilience but also experiencing cultural dissonance (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013). This dual engagement can lead to unique perspectives, increased cognitive flexibility, and the ability to navigate diverse social settings effectively. However, it may also result in identity crises or feelings of alienation, particularly when individuals perceive a lack of acceptance from either culture. Embracing biculturalism requires adaptive strategies, such as cultivating cultural competence and fostering environments that celebrate multicultural identities, which promote personal growth and societal integration.

Identity Conflicts and Resolutions

People who find it difficult to reconcile their identities as hearing and Deaf may get into arguments. Seeking assistance from the hearing and Deaf communities as well as creating a personal identity that incorporates elements of both cultures are two strategies for addressing these issues (Ladd, 2003). Policies ought to acknowledge the value of spoken and sign language for the social and educational advancement of the deaf community. Deaf identity formation and general well-being can be improved by funding bilingual and bicultural programs (Swisher, 2004).

Why Every Student in Tertiary Institutions Should Acquire Sign Language Skills

Learning sign language is a great way for students at postsecondary institutions to be more inclusive and diverse in the classroom. This essay

examines the benefits of studying sign language on a social, intellectual, and professional level and argues that it ought to be required for all students pursuing higher education.

Promoting Inclusivity and Accessibility in School Setting

Acquisition of second language such as Sign language, will not only birth inclusivity, it will also promote accessibility in school setting by

i. Enhancing Communication

Sign language acquisition fosters better communication between deaf and hearing individuals. By learning sign language, students can interact more effectively with their deaf peers, contributing to a more inclusive academic environment (Humphries *et al*., 2013). This ability to bridge communication gaps promotes equal participation and collaboration.

ii. Supporting Accessibility

Understanding sign language ensures that academic resources and interactions are more accessible to students with hearing impairments. It helps create a campus environment where everyone, regardless of their hearing ability, has equal access to educational opportunities and support services (Marschark & Spencer, 2010).

Fostering Cultural Competence

Cultural competence can be fostered through the acquisition of language and as such it will bring about the following;

i. Appreciating Deaf Culture

Learning sign language provides insight into Deaf culture, which is an integral part of understanding the deaf community. Exposure to Deaf culture and values helps students appreciate and respect diverse cultural perspectives, promoting a more empathetic and culturally competent student body (Padden & Humphries, 2005).

ii. Building Cross-Cultural Skills

Acquiring sign language skills enhances students' ability to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds, broadening their perspectives and fostering a more inclusive campus culture. This cross-cultural competence is valuable in both academic and professional settings (Glickman, 2009).

Enhancing Professional Development

Language Acquisition can enhance Professional development by**:**

i. Improving Employability

Being proficient in sign language gives pupils a special and useful skill set that improves their employability. Effective communicators with people of various backgrounds, including those with hearing impairments, are highly valued by employers in diverse sectors (Schroedel, 2017; Marschark & Spencer, 2010). This ability is especially important in fields where diversity and accessibility are crucial, such as healthcare, education, social services, and customer-facing positions (Smith, 2019). Healthcare professionals can guarantee that patients with hearing impairments receive appropriate treatment and communication, while educators who are fluent in sign language can better serve deaf pupils (Roberts & Ormrod, 2018). Such skills not only enhance organizational inclusivity but also reflect the employee’s commitment to diversity, increasing their value in competitive job markets.

ii. Expanding Career Opportunities

Being proficient in sign language gives pupils a special and useful skill set that improves their employability. Effective communicators with people of various backgrounds, including those with hearing impairments, are highly valued by employers in diverse sectors (Schroedel, 2017; Marschark & Spencer, 2010). This ability is especially important in fields where diversity and accessibility are crucial, such as healthcare, education, social services, and customer-facing positions (Smith, 2019). Healthcare professionals can guarantee that patients with hearing impairments receive appropriate treatment

and communication, while educators who are fluent in sign language can better serve deaf pupils (Roberts & Ormrod, 2018). In addition to improving organizational inclusion, these abilities show an employee's dedication to diversity, which raises their marketability in highly competitive employment markets.

Encouraging Social Responsibility and Community Engagement

i. Promoting Social Justice

By fostering equality and removing barriers to communication, learning sign language is consistent with social justice ideals (Ladd, 2003; Branson & Miller, 2002). It exhibits a dedication to inclusivity by acknowledging the intrinsic value and dignity of every person, including members of the deaf community (Young & Temple, 2014). Through mutual understanding and cooperation, sign language-trained students can help create settings where people with hearing impairments feel appreciated and respected. The educational objective of developing socially conscious individuals who are equipped to actively confront societal inequalities is in line with this quest of equity (Panagiotopoulou *et al*., 2020)

ii. Facilitating Community Engagement

Learning sign language improves students' capacity to interact with local and international communities, allowing them to make significant contributions through outreach, advocacy, and volunteer work (Miller, 2016). By helping with educational initiatives, taking part in community programs, or lobbying for legislative changes, students who possess these abilities can actively support deaf and hard-of-hearing people (Wilbur, 2008). Students gain empathy, collaboration, and leadership abilities as well as a sense of civic duty from their involvement. Furthermore, students' social experiences and professional networks are enhanced by this kind of activity, which frequently creates enduring relationships throughout various communities (Stewart & Kluwin, 2001).

The need to include sign language in General studies in all tertiary institutions in Nigeria

Including sign language in the General Studies curriculum of all tertiary institutions in Nigeria is a step toward fostering inclusivity and improving communication across diverse student populations. Here's why this inclusion is important:

i. Promotes Inclusivity

By allowing deaf and hard-of-hearing students to fully engage in social and academic activities, incorporating sign language into the curriculum fosters inclusivity. According to Young and Temple (2014), this inclusion guarantees all students fair access to education and cultivates a feeling of community. When barriers to communication are removed, the campus becomes a place where students of all hearing abilities can work together productively and succeed academically (Ladd, 2003). Furthermore, inclusive practices that set the standard for wider societal change, such as the integration of sign language, demonstrate an institution's dedication to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Branson & Miller, 2002).

ii. Enhances Communication Skills

Students who learn sign language get more communication skills and are better able to interact with a wider range of others. Effective communication is crucial in both personal and professional contexts, and this adaptability is especially beneficial in both (Marschark & Spencer, 2010). According to Roberts and Ormrod (2018), sign language improves overall communication competency by fostering nonverbal communication skills and deepening comprehension of how people express meaning without spoken words. Additionally, pupils who receive sign language instruction are better equipped to handle multicultural and multilingual situations, which is an essential ability in the globalized world of today (Smith, 2019).

iii. Fosters Cultural Understanding

Understanding sign language provides valuable insights into Deaf culture, which encompasses the shared experiences, norms, and values of the deaf community. This cultural awareness cultivates empathy and respect for diverse ways of life, challenging stereotypes and promoting social harmony (Melrose *et al*., 2020). By learning about the experiences and struggles of deaf individuals, students develop a deeper appreciation of inclusivity and equity, contributing to a culturally competent and compassionate society (Ladd, 2003; Wilbur, 2008). Moreover, exposure to Deaf culture helps bridge societal gaps, fostering mutual understanding and collaboration between hearing and non-hearing communities.

iv. Expands Professional Opportunities

Proficiency in sign language significantly enhances employability by opening up career opportunities in various fields. Employers in education, healthcare, social services, and customer relations value candidates who can communicate with a diverse clientele, including those with hearing impairments (Johnston *et al*., 2018). For example, healthcare workers with sign language skills can ensure deaf patients receive proper care, while teachers can better support deaf students in classrooms (Marschark & Spencer, 2010). Additionally, the legal requirement for accessibility services in many industries has increased the demand for professionals proficient in sign language, making this skill a competitive advantage in the job market (Davis & Williams, 2018).

v. Encourages Social Responsibility

Education in sign language aligns with ideals of social justice and equality by addressing communication barriers and fostering a more inclusive society. Learning sign language demonstrates a commitment to ensuring that everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute to and benefit from societal advancements (Young & Temple, 2014). This practice embodies the principles of fairness, equity, and respect for human rights, encouraging students to become active agents of positive social change (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

Moreover, promoting sign language education reflects an institution's dedication to preparing students for a world that values diversity and inclusion (Branson & Miller, 2002).

vi. Improves Campus Life

A campus where sign language is a common skill fosters a more inclusive and welcoming environment for students with hearing impairments. This inclusive atmosphere enables all students to feel valued and supported, which is essential for academic and social success (Moores, 2010). By normalizing sign language, campuses create spaces where communication barriers are minimized, leading to stronger peer connections and a greater sense of community (Smith, 2019). Furthermore, initiatives that promote inclusivity improve overall student satisfaction and enhance the institution's reputation as a leader in diversity and inclusion (Miller, 2016).

vii. Incorporating Sign Language in General Studies Programs

Introducing sign language into General Studies programs in Nigerian tertiary institutions has the potential to drive positive change. It enhances communication, fosters cultural understanding, and promotes inclusivity, all while equipping students with valuable skills for the workplace and society at large (Johnston *et al*., 2018; Ladd, 2003). By bridging communication gaps and celebrating diversity, these programs prepare students to contribute to a more equitable and inclusive world.

Conclusion

The development of a deaf identity is heavily influenced by the acquisition of spoken and sign language, and bilingualism and biculturalism are critical elements in this process. Being proficient in sign language helps deaf people feel more connected to the Deaf community and to itself. Speaking well in spoken language also makes it easier to integrate into the hearing world and to take advantage of possibilities. Although bridging these two cultures can be

difficult, doing so offers special chances for identity development and personal progress.

Education methods that facilitate the acquisition of spoken and sign language are essential for deaf people to have a well-rounded identity. It is imperative for institutions to cultivate atmospheres that uphold linguistic and cultural inclusion, enabling persons who are Deaf to prosper in both hearing and Deaf societies. Deaf people can have a more powerful and complete sense of self by adopting bilingualism and biculturalism, which will ultimately improve their social and personal well-being. In order to guarantee that deaf people can successfully integrate and thrive in a variety of language and cultural contexts, it is imperative that bilingualism and biculturalism be supported through inclusive educational methods and social awareness.

Recommendations

To promote and enact Bilingualism and Biculturalism, the following recommendations are made:

1. Children should be exposure early to bilingual acquisition. Early exposure to both sign language and spoken language is crucial for deaf children. Encouraging a bilingual environment from birth supports cognitive development, social integration, and a well-rounded sense of identity.
2. Emphasize should be made the Importance of Sign language as a first language for deaf individuals. Sign language should be prioritized as the first language to ensure full linguistic access. This allows for the development of a strong linguistic foundation, which positively influences self-identity and communication skills.
3. Schools should create bicultural learning environments. Schools and families should embrace both Deaf and hearing cultures to help deaf individuals navigate and understand both worlds. This helps in forming a bicultural identity, reducing feelings of isolation from either community.

4. Family should be involved in sign language learning. Encourage families of deaf children to learn sign language to enhance communication within the home. Family fluency in sign language strengthens family bonds and affirms the deaf child's identity.
5. The Government should develop inclusive education systems. Schools should offer bilingual education programs that include both sign language and spoken/written language instruction. This approach allows deaf students to benefit from both languages without prioritizing one over the other.
6. Every parent of deaf children and teachers of deaf children as well as policy makers should Acknowledge the social role of sign language in identity formation. Recognize that sign language is more than a communication tool; it is also a cultural and social connector for the deaf community. Participation in Deaf culture through sign language strengthens identity and fosters a sense of belonging.
7. The society and all communities as well as Schools should support speech development without marginalizing sign language. For deaf individuals who are capable of developing spoken language, this should be encouraged alongside sign language without implying that spoken language is superior. This promotes a healthy bilingual identity.
8. Schools should encourage peer interactions in both languages. Promote environments where deaf individuals can engage with both deaf and hearing peers. Exposure to both signed and spoken language communities fosters social skills in both cultures and reinforces a positive bicultural identity.
9. Schools should Use technology to enhance language learning. Leverage technologies like captioning, hearing aids, and apps that support sign language and speech learning. This encourages deaf individuals to navigate both linguistic worlds more effectively.

10. Government should promote research on bilingualism in deaf individuals. Invest in research that studies the cognitive, emotional, and social impacts of bilingualism in deaf individuals. This helps refine educational approaches and support identity formation.
11. The Education system should through the service of school counselors and therapists offer counseling for bicultural identity development. Provide counseling services that focus on the unique challenges of forming a bicultural identity. Guidance can help deaf individuals understand and integrate their experiences within both Deaf and hearing cultures.
12. The National Education System should encourage representation of deaf role models. Highlight the success of bilingual and bicultural deaf individuals in both the Deaf and hearing worlds. Representation of such role models affirms the value of embracing both identities and promotes self-confidence.

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