

Chapter 13

Challenges and Opportunities of Teaching in Multilingual Deaf Communities in Sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

In Africa, the discussion on the language for deaf education has always centred on the official recognition of sign languages in Africa. Interestingly, just as many African countries have been bequeathed with foreign languages as official languages, foreign-based sign languages are used in many African countries for deaf education. The average educated deaf signer in most African communities has knowledge of at least two sign languages and one or more spoken languages. Ultimately, signing communities have become quite complex multilingual communities. This chapter explores the challenges and opportunities of teaching in multilingual deaf communities in sub-Saharan Africa. With analysis drawn from a synthesised primary and secondary data, the chapter argues that the best approach to deaf education is utilising bimodal multilingualism so that the deaf and hard of hearing students can access deaf and hearing worlds. The chapter also suggests ways of appropriating multilingualism without making indigenous African sign languages inferior.

INTRODUCTION

Africa is linguistically diverse with more than 2000 different languages. The multilingualism in Africa is caused by inter and intra community migration which has caused people with different linguistic repertoire to co-exist in the same community. Zsiga et al. (2015, p. 1) quoted that “in so many African communities, languages are layered or nested, in concentric circles.” In most cases, language users’ mother-tongue is often different from the language used for education and national communication. Thus, the possibility of a community using a preferred language at home which is different from the language

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used at school and the language used in neighbouring communities is high. According to Brock-Utne, (2017), multilingualism is common in African communities, and among the different languages is usually a regional one that serves as a language of instruction in schools (Brock-Utne, 2017). The diversity in languages imply that in most African societies, most people are either bilinguals/multilinguals in the languages of the community or multilinguals in the official language and two or more languages used in the community. Multilingualism has great advantages for African economies (Brock-Utne, 2017), and has contributed to trade and industry in Africa. However, in African Deaf communities, multilingualism has always worked against minority or indigenous sign languages in rural communities (Edward, forthcoming). These diverse linguistic repertoires of African communities affect the different signing communities in Africa.

As noted by Nyst (2010, p. 405) studies on sign languages in (West) Africa are “very rare and for a number of countries information is completely lacking” while others have available “only bits and pieces of information.” Important to consider is that sign languages are natural languages used by Deaf¹ communities all over the world and fulfil all requirements of full-fledged human languages. It is important to note that members of Deaf communities identify as socially and culturally deaf and maintain a distinction between audiological deafness and sociocultural deafness (Reagan, 2008). Signed and spoken languages share the same levels of linguistic analysis, i.e., both have phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax etc. (Pfau et al., 2012). Although the history of Deaf education has demonstrated a coordinated approach to educate deaf students with speech in an oral approach, these different attempts have failed. Very notable of these attempts to ban deaf people from using sign languages in education is the infamous Milan Conference of 1880. The conclusion drawn from this meeting was that oral education was better than signs and this saw the era of using spoken language to teach Deaf individuals.

In Africa, the discussion on the language for deaf education has always centred on the official recognition of sign languages in Africa. At the moment, only four African countries² have given legal recognition to their national sign languages. Interestingly, just as many African countries have been bequeathed with English and French as official languages, imported or foreign-based sign languages (Edward & Akanlig-Pare, 2021) are used in many African countries for deaf education. Contrastively, indigenous African sign languages are barely used in education. Asonye et al. (2020) identified that most of the literature on indigenous African sign languages predicts endangerment and extinction of most indigenous African sign languages. Thus, the average educated deaf signer in most African communities has knowledge of at least two sign languages. Ultimately, the different signing communities have become quite complex multilingual communities as Deaf signers are either unimodal multilinguals with knowledge of different sign languages or bimodal multilinguals with knowledge of different signed and spoken languages (Zeshan and Webster, 2019). Berent (2013) noted that increasing numbers of signers are gaining knowledge of two or more sign languages.

Deaf individuals from Africa are increasingly gaining formal and informal knowledge of school-based sign languages. Formal knowledge refers to the school-based use of these different sign languages used across Africa. On the other hand, the informal knowledge emerges from contact with users of these school-based signs. Other deaf people in Africa have acquired the school-based signs as their mother tongue. The signers who acquired these school-based sign languages informally have different levels of proficiency depending on their exposure to it. For example, Edward (2021a) and Edward and Akanlig-Pare (2022) identified that deaf signers from Adamorobe, an indigenous community in Ghana have different levels of proficiency in Ghanaian Sign Language (GhSL) which is the language for deaf education in Ghana.

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