

Barriers to Inclusivity: Sign Language Interpreters' Challenges at Higher Education Institutes

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Abstract: *This study examines the challenges faced by the sign language interpreters in fulfilling their role and responsibilities to deal with the students with hearing impairment (SWHI) at higher educational institutions. The research aims to identify the barriers to inclusion for students with hearing impairments in higher education and the role of sign-language interpreters in overcoming these challenges. The study population comprises all sign-language interpreters working at higher education institutions in the district of Lahore. The data was collected from five interpreters of public and private universities using semi-structured interviews. The study finds out that there are several obstacles faced by the interpreters in educating the students with hearing impairments challenged and communication deficient students, such as prevailing unacceptance ratio of fellow teachers and the students and lack of administrative support in this regard at large. It also highlighted the importance of knowledge, dedication, and commitment for sign-language interpreters and the need for institutional support, materials, and methods to guarantee their success.*

Key Words: Sign-Language, Hearing Impairment, Inclusivity, Interpreters, Challenges

Introduction

Access to education, including higher education, is regarded as a basic human right for all people, irrespective of their sociodemographic or physical circumstances. It is also seen as essential for the advancement and development of a country (Mohanty, 2000; Udoba, 2014). Education is a reflection of a sustainable destination; in particular, Higher education (HE) is seen as increasingly important for citizens of developing countries in South Asia (Haider, 2008). Higher education's success is characterized by the degree to which it graduates in high-value crops, as it supplies the knowledge and skills required for nation-building and decision-making. However, the idea of increasing accessibility to higher education is not a recent phenomenon, but there are still disparities within certain countries, like Pakistan, that impede individuals with specific needs, particularly students with hearing impairment, from accessing higher education.

Hearing plays a crucial role in the teaching-learning process, allowing individuals to receive information through the ears of the external environment. According to WHO, 2017, hearing impairment refers to a reduction in the ability to hear and results in difficulties in understanding conversational speech and perceiving loud sounds. It can range from mild hearing loss to complete deafness. Deafness refers to a partial or complete loss of the sense of hearing. Individuals facing difficulty hearing or deafness typically rely on sign language as their primary mode of communication. In such a scenario, individuals with hearing impairments (Deaf and Hard of Hearing, DHH) often require the assistance of interpreters to convert spoken or written languages into a visual format for better comprehension and understanding (Laviosa &

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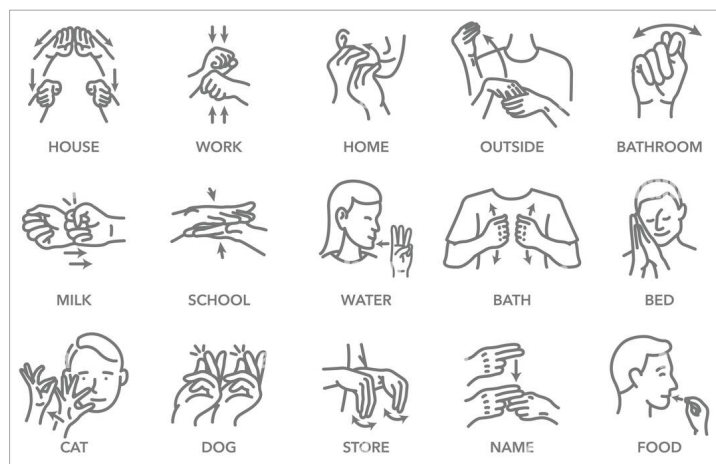
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Davies, 2020). Individuals who are prelingually deaf and utilize sign language typically exhibit lower literacy levels compared to their hearing peers. A significant number of these individuals tend to avoid reading and writing, favoring communication through sign language instead (Maaß, 2022). These signs include everyday actions and academic actions as well, e.g.

Figure 1

Sign Language Sketches



Courtesy: www.alamy.com

The significant volume of study on sign language interpreters' roles, qualifications, skills, and challenges faced at work, as well as their efficacy, reflects their prominence. Furthermore, providing effective interpreting services to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) necessitates a distinctive variety of expertise, including interpreting expertise, linguistic proficiency, signal management, and intercultural communication, all of which empower interpreters to execute a variety of integrated tasks (Smith, 2013). Aside from that, the profession and commitment framework of sign language interpreters in higher education in Pakistan has yet to be clearly defined. At present in majority these areas are uncertain and unclear due to the diverse and challenging work environment and lack of the sufficient research.

Statement of the Problem

Pakistan, a developing state of 130.58 million populations, is the seventh densest country in the world. Even though unfortunately, its literacy rate is relatively low, placing it at 160th in the world and at the 55th percentile (Pakistan Ministry of Finance, 2003). According to the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, 2002, 2.49% of the population is disabled, with 7.40% classified as Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH). Despite the administration and stakeholders' efforts at the higher education level to support special needs teachers for the disabled, their productivity and efforts are being hampered by a number of challenges. That is the major reason why students with hearing impairments have not been able to receive adequate education that allows them to reach their full potential and play a role in national development. As a result, the study aims to identify the challenges faced by sign language interpreters working at the higher education level in order to assist DHH students in particular.

Purpose of the Study

This study examines the challenges faced by sign language interpreters in fulfilling their role and responsibilities to deal with students with hearing impairment (SWHI) at higher educational institutions. It aims to determine the challenges with respect to the possible applicable solutions in particular. In particular, the primary objectives of the study are the following:

1. To identify the challenges facing by the sign language interpreters while working at higher education institutions, Pakistan.
2. To explore the effectiveness of the challenges towards the role of the sign-language interpreter at the high education level in Pakistan.
3. To find out the possible measures that can be implemented to resolve the challenges of sign language interpreters at high education level, Pakistan

Research Questions

1. What are the challenges faced by the sign language interpreters while working at higher education institutions, Pakistan?
2. How the identified challenges effect the role of the sign-language interpreter at high education level in Pakistan?
3. What are the possible measures which can be implemented to resolve the facing challenges of sign language interpreters at high education level, Pakistan?

Limitations and Delimitations

In pursuing its objectives, this study encountered certain constraints. To begin, a qualitative technique was utilized, with randomly selected interpreters participating in the research, and owing to the difficulty of approaching the targeted participants in person, a few of the interviews were conducted over the phone. The inability to determine whether the sample size included in the study was representative of the target demographic was another disadvantage of the study. Furthermore, there are few studies that focus on the difficulties of performing the responsibility of interpreter in the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) context.

The study's restricted scope was the sign-language interpreters in Pakistani higher education, specifically the students with hearing impairment. Therefore, the results and conclusions of the study may only apply to contexts similar to Pakistan's and may not be generalizable to other settings. Furthermore, the research identifies about functions of SWHI interpreter services in Pakistani higher education institutions, and examined how difficult described functions are assigned and service providing areas in capacity of sign- language interpreter at institutions. As a result, the researcher did not look into any other patterns that might be connected to the above-mentioned aspects.

Literature Review

In Pakistan, students with hearing impairment have traditionally been educated in separate special schools, isolated from their non-disabled peers in a segregated system of education. This division results in significantly reduced opportunities for social interactions on a daily basis and economic independence in the long run. However, as society develops, the concept of "learning for everyone" in Pakistan is shifting towards an inclusionary school system, with special accommodations for students with hearing impairment (Hameed, 2003). This encourages the involvement of students with hearing impairment in higher education to enhance the socio-economic parameters in particular. In participating in High Education, the SWHI needs a bridge as the channel of communication. According to Ibrahim et al. (2016), effective communication is crucial for human interaction in regular paradigms and can be achieved through the efficient use of verbal and non-verbal means. However, in the case of SWHI, particularly in educational circumstances, both deaf and non-deaf students need a resource person for effective communication, particularly in a classroom setting. This can be successfully achieved by the involvement of the sign-language interpreters at large.

A sign language interpreter's influence is dynamic and versatile rather than rigid and structured (Lee & Llewellyn-Jones, 2011), which implies that translators must render for accomplish the objectives to handle diverse circumstances and improve success in the various settings they encounter. Humphrey and Alcorn (2007) argue that A sign-language interpreter's significant position is to enable equal access to information for both SWHI and hearing individuals by bridging the communication gap between spoken and signed language. The purpose of interpreters is to attain dynamic equivalence, which means that they want to accurately express the speaker's whole meaning and intent to the listener. On the other hand, Brown and Schick (2011) and Anita and Kreimeyer (2001) broadly describe the role of a sign-language interpreter as having responsibilities to provide clarity to instructions, facilitate interactions among peers, and provide updates regarding the educational professional settings towards the students with hearing impairment' learning progress. These educational sign-language interpreters may, whether consciously or unintentionally, serve as the linguistic model for the SWHI. The prevailing assumption is that a sign-language interpreter's organized function leads to communication, although they may also be more actively involved in the classroom. Nonetheless, a number of studies have been done on the functional position of sign language interpreters. The study findings, however, reveal the positional diversity that is controlled by the interpreters' environment, qualifications, and training, which may or may not be loaded with problems. Interpreters serve as a significant resource for diverse teams by facilitating communication



between deaf and hearing individuals while also championing the needs of deaf students. However, they face distinct challenges specific to the research setting, including determining the appropriate timing and methods for interpretation (Ott et al., [2020](#)).

Studies with the practical measure identify the challenges faced by the sign-language interpreters at different levels, be it school or higher education level, and reflect the core role of the sign-language interpreters for better education opportunities for the SWHI at large. Smith ([2008](#)), Rumjanek et al. ([2012](#)), and Flores and Rumjanek ([2015](#)) describe the functional capacity of sign-language interpreters, particularly in educational settings. According to the mentioned studies, the interpreters facilitate the entire teaching-learning process by serving as the bridge of communication between the teachers, SWHI, and fellow students with normal hearing. According to the interpreters, further steps must be done to ensure successful inclusion of students with hearing impairments in educational institutions. This includes the greater recognition of working conditions for these professionals. The interpreters also emphasized the need for teachers to learn sign language in order to improve the psychological well-being and the sense of acceptance among deaf students in institutional settings.

The study by Alzahrani ([2022](#)) in Saudi Arabia examined the functions and obligations of sign language interpreters serving the Deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) community. Six semi-structured interviews with active sign language interpreters for the DHH were conducted. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. The results reveal that the interpreters' roles extend beyond mere interpretation, encompassing activities such as teaching, assisting in classrooms, providing insights about the hearing community, and managing hearing aids.

Inclusion in education for students with hearing impairments involves creating an inclusive learning environment that allows them to participate and succeed (Anisow, [2014](#)). This means taking active measures to remove barriers and create opportunities for these SWHI to participate in all aspects of life, including education, employment, and community life (United Nations, [2018](#)). This approach is based on the idea that diversity and inclusion are assets that can benefit everyone by promoting feelings of belonging, equality, and justice (Slee, [2017](#)). The research has shown that inclusive education can lead to better academic outcomes and social-emotional development for SWHI (Kuger, [2018](#)), and inclusive workplaces can lead to better performances and productivity (Baron & Kenny, [1986](#)). The importance of understanding the experiences and barriers faced by students with hearing impairments in this context and success is critical (Anisow, [2014](#); United Nations, [2018](#)). Numerous deaf children experience restricted access to both spoken and signed language during their formative years, which adversely impacts various developmental areas. Relying on interpreters in lieu of suitable educational support may worsen the effects of language deprivation, extending the duration during which a child has limited access to language (Caselli et al., [2020](#)).

Barriers to inclusion for SWHI may include inadequate policies and practices, lack of accessibility, lack of knowledge and understanding about deaf culture and language, and lack of trained and qualified interpreters (Anisow, [2014](#); United Nations, [2018](#)). Inadequate policies and practices can create barriers for individuals with hearing impairment by limiting their access to education, employment, and community life. Lack of accessibility in physical spaces and technology can also create obstacles for SWHI (United Nations, [2018](#)). Furthermore, a lack of knowledge and understanding of deaf culture and language can create a communicative hurdle toward social inclusion (Ladd, [2003](#)). Finally, the lack of trained and qualified sign-language interpreters can create barriers for SWHI by limiting their access to information and communication in various settings (Anisow, [2014](#)). Overall, these challenges can significantly impact the inclusion and participation of SWHI in various aspects of life and addressing these barriers through inclusive policies and practices is crucial for promoting the rights and opportunities, particular to educational settings.

Methodology

It is a qualitative study to determine the challenges faced by the sign-language interpreters working at higher education institutions of Pakistan. This study was conducted among the sign-language interpreters currently working at different private-public higher educational institutions, mainly Lahore, Pakistan.

Participants and Sampling Methods: In this study, the researcher used face-to-face and telephonic unstructured interviews to collect data. Interviews were conducted with five sign-language interpreters who are currently providing their services at universities to know from them what difficulties they are facing in higher education as the role of the sign-language interpreters. Additionally, the researcher asked them to suggest some remedies that might be used to solve the issues they are having.

Instrument: A qualitative survey was used for the purpose, with questions covering demographic background and administrative and technical, conceptual, and psychological challenges. Three questions covering demographic information were (1) gender, (2) educational qualification, and (3) employment industry experience. The remaining questions were open-ended questions including (4) did you get any administrative/ technical support? (5) Are there sufficient sign-language interpreters? (6) do you get lecture material in advance from the teachers? if so, then is it beneficial or if not, then how it can be improved? (7) are you, along with SWHI, getting the acceptance of presence in a class by normal students? If not, then does it have an impact on the teaching-learning environment in particular? (8) A lack of Sign language vocabulary on the part of students could be a barrier for interpreters. (9) Do deaf students face a language problem while completing their written assignments by comprehending the interpretations of an interpreter?

To identify the challenges that are faced by the sign-language interpreters at higher education level, responses to the all-open-ended questions were taken into consideration for the study including the administrative/ technical, conceptual, and psychological challenges and the practical implementation of suggested recommendations.

Data Analysis and Findings

To analyze the qualitative data collected from the interviews, the researcher employed the thematic analysis method after transcribing the collected audio material. Thematic analysis is a technique for identifying and interpreting patterns or themes within the data. The main themes in the data are identified based on the answers provided by the interviewees.

The study identified a few challenges regarding sign-language interpreter roles at the higher education level in Pakistan. Among all the identified challenges, acceptance of sign-language interpreter as an instructor, cultural background differences, lack of unified sign-language vocabulary, and cooperation between the lecturer and the sign-language interpreter were highlighted as major challenges. The following themes were derived from the transcription of the collected data:

- ▶ Lack of trained and expert sign-language interpreters
- ▶ Acceptance of sign-language interpreter as instructor
- ▶ Lack of coordination between the sign-language interpreters and the regular teacher
- ▶ Curriculum structure
- ▶ Lack of a unified sign-language vocabulary structure

Theme 1: Lack of Trained and Expert Sign-Language Interpreters

When the question asked the correspondents about the sufficient available sign-language interpreters within the educational structure, all the correspondents denied the presence of sufficient sign-language interpreters within the structure. The respondents responded by explaining that due to the lack of acceptance of being an interpreter, the potential teachers do not want to specialize in sign-language interpretation, the acceptance by both the society and the institutional structure. According to them, the problem could not be seen with normal teachers and instructors.

Theme 2: Acceptance of Sign-Language Interpreter as Instructor

Lack of acceptance of sign-language interpreters as instructors, like other instructors, is another major challenge faced by the sign-language interpreters working at higher educational levels. According to them, they are not considered to be the part of institutional (departmental meetings), they do not have an active participation regarding timetable setting like other instructors do have. One of the respondents concluded that by saying that sign-language interpreters should be treated as like other instructors within the institution as they are also working as the teacher within the structure regardless of the special need education factor.



Theme 3: Lack of Coordination between the Sign-Language Interpreters and the Regular Teacher

According to the sign-language interpreters, the significant challenge faced is the lack of coordination and the bond between the sign-language interpreters and the instructor. According to them, the interpreters should be given the class material in advance by the lectures for the preparations to ensure the effectiveness of the teaching-learning environment for the SWHI. The bond is also necessary for the communication channel between both the interpreter and the lecturer. Sometimes, the interpreters need time to convey the concept through signs to clarify the doubts of the SWHI, and due to the strong bond, the lectures could wait for them. However, in reality, due to a lack of coordination and bond, the interpreters need to note down the concept and ask the SWHI to get it clear after the class.

Theme 4: Curriculum Structure

Another important challenge that is faced by sign-language interpreters working at the higher educational level is the curriculum structure. As per the interpreters, the syllabi and the course content are not designed specifically to understand and conceptualize the SWHI. As all the students are not the same, they face many obstacles regarding the course content completion, the assignment tasks, and the papers. However, instructors do not involve them while formulating the curriculum structure, taking into consideration the SWHI in particular.

Theme 5: Lack of a Unified Sign-Language Vocabulary Structure

The most crucial and notable challenge faced by sign-language interpreters is the lack of sign-language vocabulary. According to all the respondents, there is no unified sign-language vocabulary exist at the educational structure like other countries do have. They narrated those countries like America do have a unified code of vocabulary used as the sign-language, American Sign-language code. The country lacks a unified sign-language vocabulary. They added that every region and area has different sign-language vocabulary. Like in Lahore, one of the special needs schools is formulating and structuring their own sign-language vocabulary. The institutions in Karachi have a different vocabulary from the Punjab. This added fuel into the fire when understanding about the communication channel between the SWHI and the Interpreters and among the peer as well.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings indicate that sign-language interpreters face several challenges in the higher educational structure. These challenges range from the unacceptance by fellow colleagues towards them as well as towards the presence of SWHI in the teaching-learning environment, the insufficient and effective sign-language vocabulary, and the lack of administrative structure towards the need for more sign-language interpreters at different sections within the higher educational institutions. The study analysis and findings reflect about the importance of the sign-language interpreters in respect to the acceptance level, skilled set of qualities with optimum training and education to understand about the needs of the SWHI in specific. In this regard, there is a dire need to get a unified, structured, and comprehensive sign-language vocabulary under the framework of the Pakistan Sign Language code to improve interpreter/SWHI communication and eradicate the cultural differences created due to the lack of one structured sign-language code. Moreover, the institutions should hire fully trained and equipped interpreters to deal with SWHI, with reference to the training workshops for non-interpreter instructors to learn sign language, which lessens the dependency of the interpreters at large. Interpreting for SWHI requires knowledge, dedication, and commitment at all aspects of the institutions by reflecting institutional support, having access to lesson material at the right time, and having appropriate and up-to-date sign-language vocabulary.

Sign-language interpreters play a crucial role in the education of students with hearing impairment, including at the higher educational level. They act as the connecting bridge between the teachers and the students, and their performance has a direct impact on their academic success and the inclusion of these students in society. In the study, the researcher aimed to identify the challenges faced by the sign-language interpreter working at the higher educational structure with practical measures. According to the interpreters, some serious steps should be taken with reference to the faced challenges including the acceptance ratio, sign-language vocabulary and more skilled and trained interpreters in particular.

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