LANGUAGE BARRIERS IN DEAF-CENTRED CLASSROOM: PERSPECTIVES FROM MALAYSIAN DEAF ADULTS

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Effective communication is important for Deaf students to receive their education. In Malaysia, Deaf students may face ineffective communication with their teachers in Deaf-centred classrooms in both mainstream and special schools from Standard 1 until they graduated as their native language, Malaysian Sign Language (BIM) was not recognised as a language of instruction. This article investigates the communication efficacy between hearing teachers and Deaf students. The data were collected from Deaf adults who graduated from schools and analysed from a constructivist point of view using an interpretative phenomenological epistemology. Grounded theory and constant comparative analysis were applied on the data in order to reveal to what level they accomplished effective communication. The findings revealed that Deaf adults had learning struggles in their classroom because they lacked effective communication with teachers, which led to a conclusion that BIM should be used as the language of instruction.

Keywords: Communication barrier, students, teachers, deaf, education, language

INTRODUCTION

Every school student needs to have effective communication with teachers in order to have full accessibility to education. Deaf students also have similar needs. Yet, their needs have been poorly interpreted by educators and they have often used highly ineffective communication methods, designed by hearing people, and which are still in use in Special Needs Education in Malaysia today, for example, Total Communication, Manually Coded Malay, Malay Cued Speech, oralism method, and some hybrid sign languages. As a result, Deaf students have suffered in their education to the point of failure. Hence, it is important to examine what the right communication method is for them to excel in their education.

After the Federation School for the Deaf (FSD) first opened its doors to Deaf children in 1954, Yahaya-Isa (2004) brought back a form of strict oral communication to facilitate education for the Deaf. Any form of signed communication by the students was prohibited (Nakamura, 2002). The oralism method failed many students in their education (Yahaya-Isa, 2004). Therefore, they shifted to Total Communication which was then officially introduced into the education system for the Deaf in 1978. Total Communication is an educational method that permits simultaneous use of speech, lip-reading, finger-spelling and manual signs (Evans, 1982).

As part of Total Communication, Manually Coded Malay (KTBM) was developed to meet Total Communication requirements where the students would sign according to Malay grammar (Asmah, 1978). Mr Tan Chin Guan started a home-based language intervention project trial with Deaf students with a Malay Cued Speech (MCS). The MCS was adapted and developed from the American Cued Speech with the help of Dr R Orin Cornett in 1982 (Zulkhairi et al., 2013). The Ministry of Education did not recognise the MCS as part of Malaysia's Total Communication until 2009 (Tan, personal communication, June 1, 2012). Deaf students use their hands to communicate in KTBM and MCS to "speak" Malay. Malaysian Sign Language (BIM) is not part of Total Communication because Deaf students do not "speak" Malay when they communicate in BIM.

BIM is a separate language and has its own grammar structure, which is developed by the Deaf community in Malaysia. Deaf people could not speak and listen to Malay or English on a daily basis, and they have better communication in BIM with each other (Bell et al., 2015). BIM became part of their culture, and BIM was developed to become a more structured language, resulting from their daily constant communication. Hence, they are able to have meaningful conversation and true personal interaction. Having said that, they are able to have full accessibility in mainstream society, provided that BIM is used to facilitate the communication. Deaf students should have similar privileges to enable them to have a meaningful school learning experience.

The practice of Total Communication remains in use, despite the fact that the Persons with Disability Act 2008 has recognised BIM as an official language of the Malaysian Deaf community but it is somehow vague as it is suggested that BIM is used only for communication purposes (Bell et al., 2015). BIM is not widely recognised, even by the Malaysian legal system (Abdullah & Che Rabiaah, 2012). This suggested that BIM is not recognised to have an equal status to Malay and English, and is not part of Total Communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language as Instruction

A socially dominant language is usually favoured over socially subordinate languages in order to retain its privileges in accessing society, economy and education (Lippi-Green, 2012). In this sense, with a standard language in place, it is assumed that linguistic minorities such as indigenous people, immigrants, and members of the Deaf community, will become informed citizens with full participation in society if they use the dominant language. Hypothetically every person could just speak and hear one language around the world, yet, Deaf people still could not do it as they lack hearing and speaking ability. In the United States, American Sign Language (ASL) is used as a language of instruction in the Deaf education. This has enabled the students to have a great deal of access to their education (Lange et al., 2013). Tang et al. (2014) find that Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL) works best with Cantonese in teaching young Deaf students. Such sign bilingual model is not implemented in Deaf-centred classrooms in both mainstream and special schools for primary and secondary education in Malaysia (Khairul et al., 2018). Most teachers used KTBM to teach Deaf students, which means to give the students a hard time to understand their class. The argument is, KTBM is not equal to ASL or HKSL; hence Deaf students in Malaysia never experience bilingual education.

Language Barriers Facing Linguistic Minority Students

In general, Deaf students may grow up speaking a different language other than the language of instruction used at schools. They need accommodations in classrooms so that they would be able to pick up their education. These students are incapable of picking up their education if they are uncomfortable with a language unfamiliar to them; therefore it is important to use the right language for their learning process (Ashraf et al., 2013). Their native language can be used as language support to the language of instruction, if the language of instruction is not their native language in the classroom to ensure students understand the subjects. Without appropriate accommodation given at schools, they are unable to study many subjects, which would limit their study opportunities or work options after their graduation (Thapa & Adamson, 2018). This affects their mental well-being (Gatwiri, 2015). Students became frustrated when they could not understand anything in the classroom. It also happened to Deaf students.

Deaf students are considered as a linguistic and cultural minority even though most of them were born to hearing parents (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004). Research studies acknowledge that deaf children were not taught their local sign language in the early years (Humphries et al., 2014; Kasai et al., 2012; Malaia & Wilbur, 2010). They grew up with little exposure to their mother tongue. Deaf students often found themselves learning school subjects through the KTBM that they have never seen, which is similar to Luft's (2017) study. KTBM is neither a native language nor the language of instruction. It is a way of speaking Malay by using hands. Research studies showed that Deaf students were incapable in learning school subjects, which further supported that the KTBM is ineffective (Aidah et al., 2016; Liong & Mohd Hanafi, 2016).

Bilingualism

Sign bilingual education is the rightful process for the Deaf students to study as they rely on written languages, not spoken languages (Tang et al., 2014). It is possible for sign languages to be understood or expressed through a written system; however, there is very little development on the writing system (Grushkin, 2017). Deaf students do not have access to their local sign language in their printed learning materials. The use of their local sign language as language of instruction in classrooms, however, would be helpful in their learning process. To make the sign bilingual education happen, Deaf students must acquire their local sign language at an early age and then at least one written language as a second language to enable them to obtain their school education. Two languages used for learning purposes may be effective as Parker et al. (2005) report that linguistic minority students could not do well in their education with their native language, but would do better when placed in a bilingual education after changes made in their education policy.

Malaysia has poor understanding about bilingualism as Soh et al. (2020) find that studies on bilingualism and language processing in Malaysia are scarce. To enable teachers to transfer knowledge to students and provide appropriate accommodation as needed, sign bilingual education works only if school teachers have a necessary fluency in students' native language and culture in classrooms (Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013). Sibanda (2015) finds that deaf children could not do well in their study because their teachers were incompetent in their sign language. The communication incompetence contributes to ineffective learning in classrooms, which may disrupt the Deaf students' learning process.

Communication between Deaf Students and Hearing Teachers

Ugwuanyi et al. (2017) finds that Total Communication may be useful for teaching and learning at school; however, teachers were not well prepared to use Total Communication efficiently. It was reported that they were unable to make full use of Total Communication to communicate ideas or concepts with Deaf students. Langga et al. (2021) find that Deaf students struggled to understand their teachers who taught English using Manually Coded English, which is similar to KTBM. The Manually Coded English is part of Total Communication. Rohmani and Chanastalia (2018) suggest that Deaf students should at least have acquired communication skills before they start their education. Rohmani and Chanastalia also find that Deaf learning would be optimised if they were taught by well-trained and skilled teachers. Getnet (2019), however, claims that teachers being experts in their teaching subject does not make them capable to teach students with special needs (i.e., Deaf students). Not only should teachers of Deaf students be well-trained, but they also need to be experts in communicating with the Deaf.

OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aims at exploring the lived experiences of Deaf students communicating with their hearing teachers and peers in Deaf-centred classrooms at primary and secondary schools. The study looked for patterns that would attempt to describe the relationship between Malaysia's education system and Deaf students' experience. The study tried to make sense of the respondents' lived experiences, applied to social settings and social relationships in general. To achieve the aims, two research questions were established:

1. What are the Deaf students' experiences related to language use and communication?
2. What factors have influenced the experiences?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study was performed from a constructivist point of view using an interpretative phenomenological epistemology in order to construct insightful accounts of the experience. The research was based on a pool of samples. This study focused on unique characteristics of individual respondents and patterning of meaning across respondents.

Sample and Sampling Technique

Respondents were recruited in the Deaf community through personal connections by using purposive sampling technique (Plowright, 2011). Twenty-eight respondents were found to meet certain criteria for the study such as: (1) Deaf; (2) 30 years old or above; and (3) had a school experience in schools between 1954 and 2000. They were willing to participate in the study.

The respondents were 19 males and 9 females. By the time the interview was conducted, six respondents were aged 60 and above, one was between 55-59, eight were between 50-54, five were between 40-54, two were between 35-39, four reported to be 30-34, and lastly, two were 29 years

old. No respondent belonged to the age group of 45-49. Five respondents were from two states each: Penang and Selangor/Kuala Lumpur while six respondents from three states each: Terengganu, Johor and Sabah. As for ethnicity, nine of the respondents were Malay, twelve were Chinese and three were Indians. The last four respondents do not belong to any of the main three ethnic groupings. For data on highest educational attainment achieved, 20 respondents did not pursue further education after leaving school. Four have obtained professional/vocational certificates while two completed diploma/degrees. Interestingly, one respondent obtained a bachelor's degree and one other, a master's degree. Their school experiences were varied, depending on exposure to their education and BIM in the time period from 1954 to 2000. Table 1 explains the degree of their experience in Deaf education in Malaysia.

Table 1

Deafness and Educational Placement

Degree of Deafness	No. of Respondents	Degree of Experience Being in Educational System for the Deaf
Born Deaf	16	Went to Deaf schools/Integrated programs until graduation
	4	Went to schools only for a brief time and never graduate
	2	Went to mainstream schools until graduation
	1	Went to school in neighbour country
Deafened	2	Have experience in Deaf schools only for secondary education
	3	Went to mainstream schools until graduation

Table 1 reveals that 23 respondents were born Deaf to hearing parents. While the 5 deafened respondents reported to have acquired their parents' spoken language before they turned Deaf. One respondent who was born Deaf and one deafened respondent reported that they did not realise they were actually Deaf until they turned 17 and 25 respectively, and because of this, they looked for some opportunity to learn BIM, only after leaving school.

Instruments

Questionnaires were designed to gather background information on the respondents and their communication choices on a daily basis. An interview guide was prepared before the interview sessions with the respondents. The guide had 15 questions; however, it was not necessarily in sequence. The questions sought their communicational experiences with their peers, teachers and principals at schools, and their learning experience in classrooms.

Data Collection Techniques

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a manner that allowed two respondents who lived in the same state to be scheduled at the same time. The arrangement helped both respondents recount their past experiences because it was found that shared experiences are often useful for data collection. However, there were cases when respondents would prefer individual interview sessions. All the interview sessions were conducted through BIM. With the respondents' consent,

their interview sessions were recorded for coding and transcription purposes. The data collection process covered three weeks. The data were collected in natural, neutral and comfortable settings where the respondents did not feel manipulated nor stressful.

Data Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were recorded for coding and transcription. The interview transcript was analysed from different levels to illustrate the respondents' experience with their teachers. The data were analysed using methods associated with grounded theory and constant comparative analysis to describe what the respondents had in common. It was used to look for patterns that would attempt to describe the experience within the Malaysian context, and then abstracted in order to integrate and refine the categories into a theory, which explains the phenomenon being investigated (Darke et al., 1998).

FINDINGS

The interview transcript analysis suggested that five major themes emerged related to the respondents' experience in communication in schools. Where appropriate, direct quotes in BIM translated into English, were presented to illustrate the experiences undertaken by students in communication and education. The findings in Table 2 have shown some demotivating factors in preventing respondents from improving their signing competency: (1) delay in their BIM acquisition; (2) use KTBM at school; (3) teachers' signing fluency; (4) teachers' responsibilities in teaching students; and (5) student's ability to understand in class.

Table 2

Respondents' Experience in BIM Exposure and Education

Emerging Themes	Number of Responses	Respondents (N)
Delay in their BIM acquisition	44	26
• Some gestures invented at school (1)		
• Learned signs at schools / at later age (16)		
• Used writing or gestures with parents or very little (18)		
• Speaking with parents (deafened) (5)		
• Used BIM with parents (3)		
• No BIM allowed (1)		
Use KTBM at school	21	14
• Interaction with peers with limited signs or gestures (8)		
• Interaction with teachers with limited signs or gestures (2)		
• Restriction - limited duration (1)		
• Signing banned - otherwise punishment (2)		
• Oralism / Lipreading (3)		
• KTBM allowed (4)		

Teachers' signing fluency • Used gesture communication (2) • Spoke to us (3) • Used KTBM to communicate (3) • Taught us KTBM (3) • Confused us with KTBM (1) • Teachers limited signs or none at all (5) • Were worse than students (1)	12	9
Teachers' responsibilities in teaching students • Conducted speech therapy and practised Total Communication (6) • Taught us little or nothing (14) • Taught us well / Provided instructions (8) • Gave encouragement and support (8) • No patience / No passion / Ignore us (8)	36	20
Student's ability to understand in class • Unable to follow class due to limited signs (5) • Lacked assistance or support (8) • Able to follow class with KTBM (1) • No further explanation in KTBM (4) • Left in a hearing classroom without support or KTBM (2) • Education not advanced enough (2) • Study well (1)	23	18

Delay in BIM Acquisition

The examination of emerging themes related to BIM acquisition delay revealed that twenty respondents reported to have learned KTBM at school. Subject #07 shared:

> *"When I learned signing for the first time at primary school, I could not understand the signing fully until I was 14 years old. No signing classes were provided... not many signs were used in the classroom to explain."*

Subject #26 said:

> *"When I started schooling, I learned how to pronounce words as well as learning signs."*

The other respondents had similarities when explaining about how they began learning sign language. Most respondents acquired signing skills for the first time in schools.

Use of KTBM

Identifying the second emerging theme was to find out if the respondents signed in schools. Fourteen respondents had some chance to use signs mainly at school. The use of signs, however,

was found to be limited. Due to the limited use, it was necessary to use gestures to carry out simple tasks. Sometimes signing was restricted, as echoed in Subject #24's statement:

> *"In my school, we did not really use signs, more likely to use gestures to communicate. We used everyday signs for example, eat and whip. The conversation was very limited."*

In Subject #23's statement*:*

> *"It was difficult to read lips at primary school. I had social interaction with fellow friends using the same language. It also happened at secondary school. Teachers used oral methods to communicate ideas. The teachers gestured very little."*

Fourteen respondents testified that signing was allowed at school. But they could not sign fluently due to limited signs when expressing ideas and feelings. Despite this, four respondents said they were allowed to sign without any restrictions or fear. Subjects #12, #18, #19 and #26 reported that signing was accepted in their schools; meanwhile, Subject #07 reported that:

> *"At secondary school, the signing was limited and I could not use it often even though I stayed at the dorm. My communication with my Deaf fellow was limited to a few signs we know."*

These respondents acquired signing skills at a later age; however, with limited meaningful conversations could not be had at school, their signing skills were limited. BIM subjects were never offered at their school. One respondent commented:

> *"I could not understand the signing fully until I was 14 years old."*

It may be due to strict rules being in place, limiting use of signs in school (i.e., restrictions were placed on how often students were permitted to sign during certain times of the day/week and in some cases, they were encouraged to speak/lip read when communicating with teachers) as reported in the interviews.

Teachers' Signing Fluency

The students' performances at school were, in most cases, strongly influenced by teachers' fluency in the communication as well as their attitude toward students. How teachers made efforts to teach students, given the limited scope they had in Malaysia, plays a big role in student learning. In this respect, the teachers' signing fluency is the third theme. Seven comments were received that most teachers were not fluent and used basic gestures when teaching the students in the classroom, according to Subject #01:

> *"The teachers usually used gesture communication to teach us. They sometimes spoke to us. It can't be only speaking to the students in the classroom for their lessons because it would make it more difficult to follow lessons."*

Similarly, Subject #02 commented:

"The teachers did not really sign in a proper way. They always confused us."

Subject #03 reported that the students at school had better competency in signing than the teachers themselves and complained that teachers should not teach students if teachers could not sign fluently.

Nevertheless, some respondents acknowledged that their teachers were good at signing, allowing them to understand what was taught. For example, Subject #02 mentioned that one of their teachers communicated in KTBM efficiently; thus, Subject #02 understood her more clearly than other teachers. Meanwhile, Subject #28 explained that he learned Shanghai signs from Peng Tsu Ying, a famous Deaf teacher in Singapore:

"*The teacher taught us signs individually. It was great and a lot better than these students who went through speech therapy. We also interacted with each other during free time to advance our signing skills."*

It is clear that this particular respondent had a different experience when compared to other respondents who attended schools in Malaysia. He learned how to sign and appreciate storytelling through Shanghai signs from the teacher. Subject #04 shared his concern that the new teachers often came to school without knowing any signs at all:

"Veteran teachers signed better than the new teachers. Most of us didn't understand the new teachers due to lack of signing ability. Some teachers didn't really show their passion in teaching us."

Teachers' Responsibilities in Teaching Students

The next theme is teachers' responsibility in teaching students. Five major sub themes were established based on the data revealed by the respondents who had similar experiences when acquiring education in schools in the past and across the five states; quality education was not optimally obtained; they were often left behind unlike hearing students in their schools. Subject #01 commented that

"I did not study anything except that I practiced pronunciation, in speech therapy with teachers."

Subject #13 had a similar sentiment:

"We were left behind for a long time after the listening therapy class. We would play-fight until the teacher came back (after one hour). Shortly after that, the bell rang indicating the school was over for the day."

The data revealed that the fourteen respondents did not learn much in class as pointed out by Subject #12:

> *"The teachers were not good. Teachers spoke and pointed to the words on the blackboard. I did not understand. I was not satisfied. I did not understand. I made many mistakes. It was not my fault".*

Nonetheless, several teachers were good as explained in the following statements:

> *"Some teachers encouraged the students to study well. Some others did not. It was hard to study Malay because we did not receive further explanation, especially on the prefix meanings"* (Subject #04)

> *"The teachers taught well in primary school. However, it did not happen the same in secondary school"* (Subject #08)

> *"I remember in the FSD, the teachers would help those who were keen on their studying. They helped me at that time. I always asked many questions"* (Subject #23)

It was reported that only eight respondents showed a positive attitude towards teachers.

Deaf Students' Ability to Understand in Class

The fifth theme focused on students' ability to understand in class, which gives a clearer perspective about the situation in schools. Data revealed that they received minimal sign use, inadequate learning support, and inappropriate education levels. Evidence for inadequate education was often mentioned such as what was declared by Subject #15:

> *"The vocational school was not great for me, cheap, not worth it for me to go but I still went there."*

Nevertheless, Subject #15 did not really have other options but continued to stay in the school and suffering the lack of understanding:

> "*I majored in servicing refrigerators and I always obtained full marks in written exams. The exams were easy to pass. It was at children's level. Teachers did not believe me and said I cheated in my exam."*

Deaf students in secondary schools were often taught what was usually taught at primary schools. Subject #08 commented, referring to the sign use in the classroom,

> *"My Deaf classmates and I were transferred to the hearing class where we were put at the back. We felt as if we were being bullied and we could not follow the class because nobody signed for us."*

On the other hand, Subject #03 pointed out that BIM helped her understand lessons in the classroom; as a result, she passed all her examinations at the FSD. She reported that she did not have the same privilege of ever using BIM at primary school; hence, she performed poorly in her examinations. Subject #09 also reported that he studied well at the FSD and added that he had good teachers in Mathematics and Art Education.

Table 3 displays the communication choices of the Deaf students in communicating with their teachers and fellow Deaf students.

Table 3

Communication Choices

Communication choices with	Percentages as in Yes (Total respondents = 28)						
	Speech	Writing	Body Language	BIM	KTBM	MCS	Lip Reading
1. Deaf classmates	17.9	14.3	28.6	57.1	14.3	3.6	7.1
2. Hearing teachers	42.9	25.0	17.9	35.7	14.3	3.6	21.4

Table 3 reveals how many respondents preferred to communicate in speech, writing, body language, BIM, KTBM, MCS, lipreading or others. For the communication with other Deaf classmates, 57% of the respondents indicated that they communicated in BIM, 29% used body language, 18% spoke, 14% communicated in KTBM and writing, less than 10% used MCS and lipreading. Meanwhile, for communicating with teachers, 43% of the respondents spoke to them, 36% used BIM, 25% wrote, 21% lipread, and less than 18% used body language and MCS. All in all, the data suggested respondents preferred BIM the most.

DISCUSSION

Students' Fluency in Communication

In Malaysia, the sign language used by Deaf people is known as BIM. It is important to note that there is insufficient academic research conducted on BIM and its linguistic structures in Malaysia. Evidence shows that Deaf Malaysians use home signs and local signs for communication purposes to carry out basic conversation (Bell et al., 2015). These were also reported by some of the respondents of this study. Hence, it is not possible to measure the current state of their fluency by what was used in the past. The respondents did not receive sufficient exposure to BIM before age 7, as in the finding by Humphries et al. (2014). This was clearly indicated when the respondents struggled to understand their teachers at schools. There were two reasons for the struggles. First, the students were not well equipped with signing skills by the time they arrived at school (Luft, 2017; Rohmani & Chanastalia, 2018). The situation worsened when their teachers were insufficiently equipped with BIM signing skills and knowledge about Deaf culture (Getnet, 2019).

When asked about their communication methods with teachers, about 36 percent reported that they communicated with teachers in signing while 43 percent indicated they used speech to communicate with teachers. It may be possible that the respondents made some contact with some form of signing at school; however, a hypothesis that could be drawn from respondents' comments is that they did not acquire BIM properly because their teachers have confused these gestures as poor signing and deformed signs. There were few occasions where teachers asked their students for specific signs, which is also stated in Sibanda (2015) in examining signing fluency of teachers of the Deaf students. Ugwuanyi et al. (2017) also reported that Total Communication is not fully fledged and that teachers were unable to make full use of Total Communication.

Asked about interacting with Deaf classmates, 57 percent of the respondents revealed they used BIM, which suggested that they made efforts at communicating more with BIM rather than any other methods. When expressing their thoughts, BIM was the language they preferred more compared with other communication methods although they were not very fluent in BIM in the past. Most of them avoided oralism methods, which were speech and lipreading. A conclusion can be drawn that the respondents were currently more fluent in BIM than in the past. The fact was that BIM was not recognised as a language in the past, it appeared to be a relatively new language and it has not gained popularity in mainstream society until now. This is supported by Bell et al. (2015) who stated that "*the general society's perception of deaf people and the use of sign language, still continue to be very naïve*" (p. 587).

Teachers' Attitude toward Minority Students

Teachers' attitudes are explicitly displayed in both negative and positive manner when dealing with students whose ethnicity is different from theirs. This being the case, the teachers of the Deaf would recognise that the students had hearing disability the moment they were presented in class although they were mandated to implement the philosophy of Special Needs Education. Patience is required in teaching Deaf students. In order to enable students to grasp lessons being taught, teachers would have to employ a variety of methods such as speech, signing and visual aids. Unlike hearing students equipped with a common language, Deaf students came in with almost no language because of limited exposure to signed or spoken languages at home. This gave them an awkward feeling. In addition, Deaf students were overwhelmed with so many lessons. Technical terms in print, not to mention finger spelling, were difficult for them to understand; thus, acquiring knowledge was a slow process (Langga et al., 2021). If this were the situation, teachers should accommodate the students so they can cope with the classroom activities.

It is noted that, in most cases, teachers never accommodate student needs when students lack language foundation, a necessary adaptive tool for language acquisition and for better learning experiences. This commonly results in Deaf students suffering from educational deficiency. Such an attitude from teachers toward Deaf students and their KTBM was examined using the data gathered for this particular study. The analysis revealed that first, teachers tended to be inefficient on account of poor lesson planning and teaching as the data suggested that teachers did not have confidence in their students' ability to understand the lesson. Second, the teachers gave up easily when it came to communicating with Deaf students as it would be tough for teachers to employ various communication methods if they were ill-equipped. The respondents remarked that teachers often spoke while pointing at words on the blackboard indicating lack of patience and consideration in the classroom. Consequently, the students were unable to comprehend.

Nevertheless, there were good teachers who inspired the Deaf students to continue learning despite their language limitations. These teachers always tried their best to keep the students informed and active in the classroom, by explaining the assignments and encouraging them to study more. These teachers also displayed their enthusiasm in situations when some students would ask for more work or further clarification on certain subjects. For instance, one respondent revealed that when there was a lack of specific sign for a certain word, the teacher would muster some creativity by explaining in length the details through concrete examples. Also, the respondents acknowledged that older teachers were better than the younger ones, especially those who were just beginning their teaching careers. In comparison, teachers with efficient communication skills were regarded as good teachers in terms of attitudes. Furthermore, Deaf students understood the older and experienced teachers more than the new ones.

The analysis revealed that three respondents confirmed that teachers used KTBM to communicate with them. Apparently, teachers used a mixture of gestures and limited signing with the respondents in school. The respondents indicated that about 36% of them communicated with teachers in KTBM, 18% used body language while 43% used speech. It was believed that teachers taught some signs to the students despite limited signing skill and despite the fact that the teachers' signing skill was worse than the students'. From what was suggested by the study, teachers had inadequate exposure to KTBM and relied rarely on visual aids even if they knew that students depended on visual aids to survive in life. It is assumed that the students had more exposure to signing than teachers at school. One respondent commented that teachers often asked students for specific signs that teachers did not know. It was made even more difficult for students, especially when teachers were not fluent in BIM. Attitudes shown by teachers toward Deaf students may be based on how fluent they were in KTBM as recounted by one respondent who said that teachers from primary school were better than those in secondary schools. It is suggested that both teachers and students were limited in their vocabulary at primary schools; thus, it may appear that both groups were able to converse, but only using limited vocabulary.

It was clear from the data that teachers were not against signing. A variety of communication methods may be employed because of the possible factors which include limited signing or the rulings mandated by the Special Education Department. One conclusion drawn was that not every teacher exhibited the same attitude to Deaf students on account of their deafness and use of KTBM. Very few teachers showed a positive attitude towards Deaf students and very few always tried signing to communicate with them.

BIM development

Those educated in the 1950s had to develop BIM from scratch, following their first encounters with other Deaf students. They were the first generation of educated Deaf people who passed BIM on to the younger generation at school. Thus it has become their language and they were motivated to acquire and then develop BIM for better communication. In many cases, Deaf students were unable to understand English or Malay and likewise unable to grasp lessons being taught in the classroom. The experience strengthened their motivation to acquire BIM as their preferred language at a faster pace for better experience of learning. Even though the respondents reported that they understood their teachers communicating in KTBM, it is arguable that most of the time both teachers and students had been communicating in BIM. It is suggested that students depended on signing in order to acquire new knowledge at school. It can be gleaned from the findings that the respondents were more likely to survive with BIM as they did not have speaking/listening

ability unlike most hearing students. In that respect, BIM does play a very important role in fulfilling the needs of a Deaf student when interacting with teachers and students and when accessing education.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that despite various communication methods continuing to exist in schools, Deaf students often look for an opportunity to use BIM to interact with each other and as a means of accessing education. It appears that the various communication methods are no longer effective for their learning as they were unable to follow classes. Furthermore, one of the respondents commented that if the teachers were fluent in BIM, they might do well in their examination. Teachers play important roles in teaching and empowering knowledge to students; however, because of their limitation in understanding BIM, the teachers become unmotivated and unable to fulfil their duty successfully in classrooms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The appreciation of Deaf students on BIM remains the same, no matter what obstacles they face in mainstream society. Teachers' efforts in bringing their students into mainstream society by forcing the norms on them (i.e., speaking, and listening, and behaving like hearing Malaysians), may prove futile and would result in limited spoken language acquisition and substandard education. This study recommends that the Deaf students need to start BIM learning as their first language acquisition at an early age, instead of any spoken languages belonging to their hearing parents. As Malaysia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2010, Deaf students should be allowed to access education through BIM, according to Article 24. BIM should be introduced as a school subject to prepare the Deaf students for better learning at school. It enables the children to receive quality education according to Goal 3 of Sustainable Development. It is necessary to implement an appropriate bilingual education policy for Deaf students and teachers need to be fluent in BIM to provide students with a bilingual environment.

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