

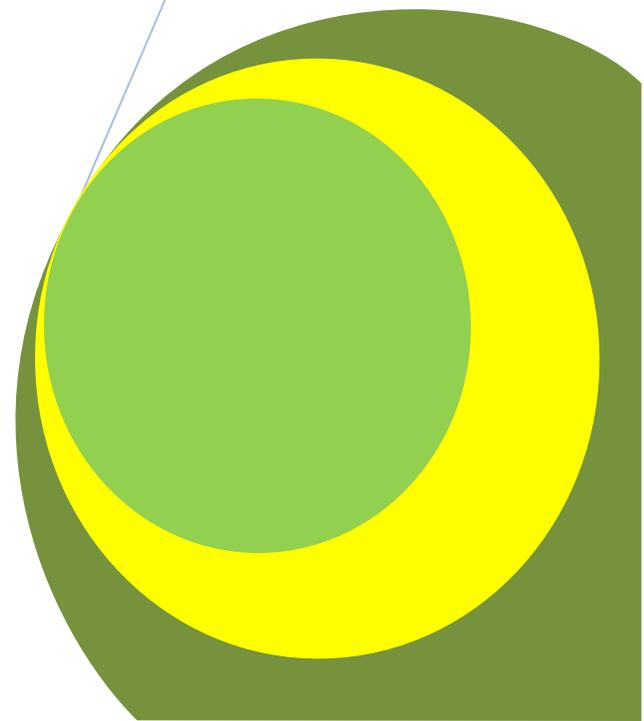
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## **Perceptions of People who are Deaf on Sign Language Teaching and Communication by Hearing People: Harare Urban, Zimbabwe**

By

**Phillipa Mutswanga  
Christine Sithole**



*Research Article*

# Perceptions of People who are Deaf on Sign Language Teaching and Communication by Hearing People: Harare Urban, Zimbabwe

\*<sup>1</sup>Phillipa Mutswanga, <sup>2</sup>Christine Sithole

<sup>1</sup>Lecturer at Zimbabwe Open University in the Department of Disability Studies and Special Needs Education.

<sup>2</sup>Director of Zimbabwe National Association for the Deaf.

Email: <sup>2</sup>csithole2512@gmail.com

\*Corresponding Author's Email: phillipamutswangah@gmail.com or mutswangap@zou.ac.zw

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**ABSTRACT**

The qualitative approach and the phenomenology design were employed to collect data for the study. Using in-depth interviews, observations and document analysis, the study explored the perceptions of ten people with profound deafness on the teaching and use of the Zimbabwean Sign Language (ZSL) in Zimbabwe by hearing people. Purposive sampling was employed to select the participants for the study from the population of people who are Deaf in the streets of Harare urban. Two directors, one from the umbrella board of people with disabilities, the National Association for Societies and Care of the Handicapped (NASCOH) and the other director was from Zimbabwe National Association of the deaf (ZIMNAD), both are described as Disabled People Organisations (DPOs) in this study, they were automatically selected to participant in the study. Interest and profound Deafness were used as criteria for the sample selection. In Zimbabwe, use of SL in day- to- day communication and learning did not have a legal status until March 2013. The current acceptance of SL as one of the 16<sup>th</sup> languages in the 2013 constitution, though awaiting domestication, triggered this study. The study revealed that hearing people were influencing the type of SL the people who are Deaf should learn. The study declared people who are Deaf as the experts to the SL that should be taught or used in Zimbabwe. The study aims to place Zimbabwe amongst global competitors on issues of Deaf education.

**Keywords:** perceptions, Sign language in Zimbabwe, profound, hearing people, first language of the Deaf.

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**INTRODUCTION**

People, who are deaf, meaning people with varied hearing losses, use varied means of communication too. In this paper the term deaf is used as a condition while capitalised Deaf means a people with their own language and a culture. Zimbabwean Sign language (ZSL) is one of the major means of communication. All languages, signed, spoken, written and unmentioned others are tools of communication for people who are deaf. ZSL is a visual language which uses manual communication and varied body signs to give meaning. This involves synchronized combination of hand shapes, orientation, movements of the arms, mouthing, body and/or facial expression to express communication. It has a variety of modes of communication that emphasis the communication and also grammatical expressions which are mostly explained through non-manual features. Sign Languages are not universal languages even though there are signs which are universal. Controversies exist regarding its status among languages and also about its use as a communication tool for people who are Deaf who subscribe to Deaf Culture. The researchers observed that people who are Deaf expressed varied sentiments on the learning, teaching and use of SL as a communication tool by the hearing people. Driven by all this, this study sought the views of people who are Deaf towards the learning, teaching and communication of SL by hearing people.

**Background to the study**

People who are deaf use varied means of communication. They may use ZSL only, written, speechreading and signed English or a combination of all of them. ZSL is a visual gestured language that is the first language used by people who are usually profoundly Deaf. It is communicated at face- to- face level, using some non-manual features

like mouthing, the eyes, the checks and the facial expressions. It has a variety of modes of communication to emphasize the issue in communication, and also most grammatical expressions are explained through non-manual features. It is used by people who are born Deaf or who became Deaf before acquiring language. As observed by the researchers they are a majority in Zimbabwe as compared to the hard of hearing.

People have different knowledge on what SL is. Some take signed English which follows the grammatical structures of English language or English added signs where you communicate in English or Shona as SL. Having observed this, people who are Deaf emphasize that SL is a language in its own right for the Deaf. People who are Deaf suggest that this brings confusion to what exactly SL is. Some people are ignoring its grammatical structure to sign it nearer to spoken languages such as Shona, Ndebele and English just to mention a few. This is easier to those who cannot communicate in the real language (ZSL). By so doing they ignore the real language which is used by the first users of SL (L1) in Zimbabwe.

In Zimbabwe, ZSL is confirmed to be a language in its own right. Researchers in collaboration with the Ministry of Education conducted research which took about 10-12 years where information, sign language vocabulary from the literate and illiterate, from the rural and urban, from the children and adults was obtained. The research came out with signs and their variations. The research took cognisance of the dialectical differences in SL. Thus, in some areas there are three different signs with one meaning or one sign with different meanings. There are also dialectical variations in SLs as in spoken languages. Instead of working on standardisation, people are taking advantage of such loose gaps to 'abuse' SLs. Thus unfortunately people are just coming up with their own signs. People are influential because the real ZSL for the Deaf is now being eroded by taking advantage of the loose areas. This is a cause of concern for people who are Deaf in Zimbabwe. The study is hoped to assist policy makers and people who shall domesticate the rules and laws of teaching and the learning of ZSL, in Zimbabwe.

In Zimbabwe, use of ZSL in day-to-day communication and learning did not have a legal status until March 2013 when it was officially acknowledged as a natural language for people who are d/Deaf by the 2013 Constitution. This is a great stride for Deaf education in Zimbabwe. According to the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No.20) (2013;17) Chapter 1 Section 6, sub-section (1); The following languages namely Chewa, Chibarwe, English, Kalanga, Koisan, Nambya, Ndau, Ndebele, Shangani, Shona, Sign Language, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda and Xhosa, are the officially recognised languages of Zimbabwe. Sub-section (3a) ensure that officially recognised languages are treated equitably and (b) take into account the language preferences of people affected by governmental measures or communications. Sub-section (4) states that, the state must promote and advance the use of all languages used in Zimbabwe, including sign language, and must create conditions for the development of those languages. The question then is what conditions are in place to create the development of ZSL in Zimbabwe? Prior to this, in Zimbabwe the Ministry of Education Sports and Culture in collaboration with ZIMNAD developed volume 1 to 2 dictionaries which are currently being used in some schools. Another dictionary Volume 1 of Zimbabwe that was developed by King George VI School and Centre which in conjunction with the two deaf associations, the National Council for the Hard of Hearing and Association of the Deaf (ASSOD) in use too. The dictionaries could not be distributed to every institution and Zimbabwean communities due to scarcity of resources. While equal distribution of dictionaries could have helped people learn a variety of signs their scarcity has opened windows to many ZSLs; some of which are pidgin SLs.

As observed by the researchers the historical educational background of deaf education in Zimbabwe partly contributed to experiences highlighted in this study. In Zimbabwe people who are deaf got exposed to basic education as early as 1947 through the establishment of the first missionary school at Loreto and Pamushana mission through the Catholic and Dutch Reformed Churches respectively. In addition to this, the commitment of the legendary, Jairos Jiri, the founder of Jairos Jiri Association and centres in the 1950s also resulted in development of Jairos Jiri schools in the country. The era established schools specifically caring for people who are deaf. However, while these schools widened the spectrum of education they also inculcated a spirit of exclusion and claims that it was a missionary duty to see to education and livelihoods of people who are deaf. This was evidenced by little government interest and support for deaf education in Zimbabwe. The type of education secluded people who were deaf from the hearing world. Thus, hearing people associated people who are deaf with charity, seeing it as a right for churches and their duty was to minimally support when churches asked for it. On the other hand the education sector did not bother itself about the delivery modes and/or mode of communication used in teaching people who are deaf. Each institution used the mode of communication they believed in, for example, sign language, aural-oral, total communication just to mention a few. In this period, hearing people did not see the need to learn or communicate with people who are deaf. This is observed by the researchers as the culprit to existing debates and controversies on ZSL learning by hearing people. The shift in policy in the education of people who are deaf was influenced by the 1987 Education Act and the 1992 Persons with Disability Act (PDA) which was amended in 1996. The policies emphasized that people who were deaf (disabled) should be educated within their neighbourhood schools using their natural languages and resources. This era marks the begging of a shift in policy towards integration which was later coined inclusive education. Lack of standardized ZSL also leaves a lot of questions unanswered.

Subtle debates and controversies on which is ZSL and which is not ZSL triggered the development of this study. Also as educationists in Deaf education conversations with people who are profoundly Deaf drove the researchers to carry out this study. The study aims to find out perceptions held by people who are Deaf in the learning, teaching and use of SL for communication by hearing people in Zimbabwe. The study answered the following research questions in a bid to make hearing people understand what SL is with a view to give it respect and the language status it deserves: (1) Is Sign Language a language? (2) How do people who are Deaf perceive the learning and use in communication of SL by hearing people? (3) How do the revealed styles impact on the plight of people who are deaf? (4) What mechanisms ought to be put in place to manage the situations?

## **Review of Related Literature**

The section highlights key issues from the related literature.

### **Definition of Sign Language**

SLs are independent of oral languages in much the same way that oral languages are in some instances independent of another but they all fulfill human communicative needs. However, everyone uses manual communication to some extent in day- to- day communications. In support Mayberry in Davis and Silverman (1978) suggest that we beckon people to us, wave them away, point to things we want and illustrate sizes of things in our conversations through signs. This is manual communication. Here we simply send information with hands and arms and receive it with eyes. It borrows from information content and also depends on environmental contexts. SL is therefore more than manual signs. NIDCD (2011) and Berke (2010) suggest that by nature SL is complex. Thus, Chimedza et al. (2007) and World Federation of the Deaf (unpagged online, article) defines SL as a visual language that uses a system of non-manual, facial and body movements as the means of communication.

### **The history of sign language**

This history is essential to make us aware of the background to the development of SL. Gallaudet went to London to acquire knowledge into the art of instructing the Deaf so as to establish a school for the Deaf children in the United States. This shows the importance of knowledge sharing. Although a disappointing experience that step created the status of what SL is today, Gallaudet went to the Abbé de l'Épée's school where he was welcomed. After studying with the Abbé de l'Épée he returned to the United States accompanied by Laurent Clerc (a deaf teacher from Abbé de l'Épée's school) to start a school for the Deaf in the United States. The school was founded in Hartford, Connecticut. The school came to be known as the American Asylum School for the Deaf.

### **Origins of Sign Languages**

Most recognised SLs have known origins. For example French Sign language (FSL) was discovered in the 1750s by Abb' de l' Epée while the American Sign Language (ASL) originated from America. However, even those, whose origin is unclear or not documented borrows a lot from home SL within families or communities. It spells out that before teacher input students have a conventional SL derived from their various home SLs. This in turn raises the frequently asked question, 'Are sign languages universal /pantomimic?' The universal response is no. Thus, to make the teaching and learning of SL easier, SL standardization is essential to lighten the job of educationists and allow focused learning and easier understanding of the language by both the public and people who are Deaf themselves. This fulfils the national definition of what language is. According to Quigley and Paul (1984) language is 'a code whereby ideas about the world are represented by a conventional system of signals for communication (Bloom and Lahey, 1978). No one form of SL is universal. Different SLs are used in different countries or regions. Thus, BSL is a different language from ASL (NIDCD, 2011). Just as other languages speech ways of expressing ideas in ASL vary as much as ASL users do (NIDCD, 2011).

### **Deaf as a linguistic minority and cultural group**

Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1994:107); Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) define minority as: A group smaller in number than the rest of the population of a state, whose members have ethnic, religious or linguistic feature different from those of the rest of the population, and are guided, if only implicitly, by the will to safeguard their culture, traditions, religion or language.

People who are Deaf may be described as a linguistic minority or a national linguistic minority. However, these descriptions carry a lot of controversies and debates. Hence this study recognises them as a linguistic minority.

Deaf studies have recently resisted putting Deaf individuals into a deaf or Deaf category (Najarian, 2008). Reagan (1985) analysed the education of the Deaf as a cultural and linguistic minority by exploring the distinctive cultural and linguistic aspects of the American deaf community and the competing approaches to the education of people who are deaf. He argues for the use of a bilingual/ bicultural instructional approach in the education of the d/Deaf.

In support of preceding ideas, World Federation of the Deaf (undated) claims that human rights can be realised only through one's own language and culture. This is true to all people including deaf people who are Deaf. The term culture is a very broad concept that encompasses the lifestyle, traditions, knowledge, skills, beliefs, norms and values shared by a group of people. As many other different human groups, people who are Deaf have a culture of their own. They express it through their language; SL is a very essential part of that culture. Among members of the Deaf cultural group, it is still common to use the concept of "Deaf World" that includes both Deaf Culture and Deaf Community. Deaf culture is the conceptual framework of the Deaf World. The Deaf Community is the visible and social part of that world strengthening sense of belonging of its members. People who are Deaf themselves use the term "Deaf culture" when referring to the customs, values, worldview, habits, and rules of behaviour related to their own world (World Federation of the Deaf (undated); Reagan, 1985).

In fact Deaf culture has existed since Deaf people started to communicate with each other. It was developed in a spontaneous way and it forms the foundation of a Deaf person's identity together with SL (World Federation of the deaf, undated). Features such as endogamy, common language and history, lineages, identification with other members of the group, sense of belonging, own social organisation; in short, awareness of one's own culture can be found also in other ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups and minorities. Thus, people who are Deaf do not make an exception from all these groups.

Because the culture of people who are Deaf is entirely based on the common language, the culture is also based on visual expression and SL. Culture is a whole way of living. People who are Deaf do not consider themselves as disabled but rather a cultural group with their own traditions and culture (Najarian, 2008). Everything that could improve and enrich people who are Deaf's quality of life is considered culture. Performing arts based on visual sense and SL is one field of Deaf culture. Deaf culture is a process in which the values, beliefs and customs are transmitted from one generation to another. Being aware of one's own cultural traditions bolsters one's identity and facilitates adapting to other cultures and environment. As observed by the researchers SL gives a strong sense of belonging. Therefore SL is a core element that makes the people who are Deaf a linguistic and cultural group (World Federation of the deaf, undated).

### **Characteristics of SL**

SL is the preferred means of communication by many deaf people. For people who are Deaf vision rather than audition is the critical link with the world. SL may be characterised as voiceless and has its own syntax. The structures of SLs are different from spoken languages. It is education that is imparted in silence. Researchers have noted that hearing people keep on wanting to influence the language of people who are Deaf but with strengthened sense of belonging through the Deaf Culture this is minimised or controlled. This is the main drive to the development of this study. The culture of people who are Deaf is entirely based on a common language. It is therefore based on visual gestural mode of communication which involves the use of non-manual features and SL (World Federation of the deaf, undated). Culture is a whole way of living. People who are Deaf do not consider themselves as disabled but rather a cultural group with their own traditions and culture as already discussed.

### **Finger Spelling**

Finger spelling was one of the first sign systems as a means of teaching people who are deaf (Mayberry in Davis and Silverman, 1978). It has managed to persist in use through out the ages and it is still in use. Mayberry in Davis and Silverman (1978) further point out that, today SL signers continue to use fingerspelling in conjunction with SLs. We are however cautioned to be aware that finger spelling directly borrows from English words where there are no signs. It plays a supplementary role and it is not a major means of communication for people who are Deaf. However, fingerspelling is still used in oral teaching and is known as the Rochester Method in United States.

### **Informal sign systems**

Informal sign systems refer to the creation of sign systems within a specific school or geographical area. For example, one school may use SL vocabulary without alteration; sign in English word order while another may use SL vocabulary with alteration, and fingerspell all verb phrase and function words. Another is SL –English Pidgin, where mixtures of two languages are used such as the vocabulary of SL where it is used with the syntax of another language such as English. This type of signing consists of SL signs in English word order and finger spelling of

plurals and/ or verbs such as 'a', 'the', 'is'. This is usually done to make communication easier for people learning SL as a second language (Mayberry in Davis and Silverman, 1978). People who are deaf may use it to demonstrate knowledge of English to people who think that their English is poor. Other sign systems include Seeing Essential English (SEE) or Seeing Exact English (SEE).

## Challenges

Fullwood (undated) noted that, Deaf people have always found it hard to be accepted as Deaf people in a world which is constantly trying to make them into hearing people. **Historically, it** seems that they were accorded legal rights only because it was demonstrated that they could be successfully assimilated into the hearing world. Researchers noted that for L1 SL to survive Deaf Culture should be kept alive despite the fact that the hearing world keeps on wanting to influence it. Agreeably, Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) asserts that oralism in the education of Deaf children is linguistic genocide. Any other language, can be so, including SL itself if improperly used. There has been enough paternalism and expert power as noted by Skutnabb-Kangas (2000). The authors further urged that people who are Deaf seemingly need to take back the power to decide own communication styles. This signifies that people who are Deaf are the best experts about SL and they should not let any hearing experts tell them what to do. Yes people who are Deaf are a linguistic minority according to definition in the international law. The question most educationists may ask is how are linguistic minorities educated today in the formal education system?

In reflection to what is ongoing Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) discovered that most children from dominate groups are in most cases taught subtractively, that is, they are taught in submersion programmes through the medium of a dominant language which replaces their mother tongue at its cost. The author however describes additive teaching as the means through which children are taught through the mother tongue or first language medium with good teaching of the dominant language as a second language. What is the situation in our systems? Do we learn something from such literature? How do we prove that learning has taken place or new knowledge has been acquired? This is food for thought in relation to SL teaching, learning and its use as a communication tool for people who are Deaf.

What do we want to achieve by using the second language to teach people who are Deaf? Are we not making them lose their language through teaching them subtractively? Agreeably, Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) suggests that killer language pose serious threats towards the linguistic diversity of the world. Thus, while cultural diversity is a necessity to human kind as biodiversity is for nature, SL is common heritage of humanity for people who are Deaf. It should therefore be recognised and affirmed for the continuity of generations of people who are Deaf. However, the death and disappearance of any SL may be irreplaceable resulting in a lost forever worldview. But we are cautioned that people who are Deaf are there to live forever so we cannot replace their means of communication. What are the linguistic human rights of the Deaf in our education systems? Answers to all these questions through more research work could help to achieve desired results in SL education.

## METHODOLOGY

The qualitative approach and the phenomenology design were employed to collect data for the study. The approach is defined by Denzin and Lincoln (2000) as a broad class of empirical procedures designed to describe and interpret experiences of research participants in a specific context setting. Supportively, Creswell (2003) refers to it as an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem by building a complex, holistic picture about it. The qualitative approach was selected to elicit data for the study because of its principles and interest on studying life as it is lived in real situations. Thus, the approach helped to examine how deafness of participants in this study interrupted their communication with the hearing world. The approach was considered the best for managing sensitive topics, like this one, where interaction perspectives of people who are deaf with the hearing are assessed on how they tolerate each other. The reason for the selection is further supported by Woods (2006) who asserts that, qualitative researchers seek to discover the meanings that participants attach to their behaviour, how they interpret it and perspectives that are held on particular issues. Agreeably, Shields and Twycross (2003) posit that qualitative methods are used when meaning of something needs to be found. In the phenomenology design the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences concerning a phenomenon which is also the focus of the qualitative approach. The design is the best for this study both as a philosophy as well as a method because it studies in-depth a small number of subjects with a view to bring out patterns and meanings of relationships on the phenomena.

The aim of the human sciences according to the phenomenology philosophy is to understand human beings, just as this study is attempting to investigate what people who are Deaf and Disabled People Organisations (DPOs) think about SL learning and teaching by hearing people. In this study DPOs are used to augment the findings from people who are Deaf themselves. This approach helped the study and its readers to make sense of SL according to

perceptions held by people who are Deaf. Through the phenomenological approach one can interpret, give meaning to a phenomena, define, explain, justify, and rationalise actions (Smith, 2003). The primary goal of this social inquiry is then to produce knowledge and truth with the intention of eliminating all forms of ignorance, superstition, and prejudice (Smith, 2003; Miller and Salkind, 2004) about the use of SL for communication by hearing people. The study is hoped to give hearing people and people who are Deaf a better understanding of themselves and greater insight into SL learning, teaching and using it as a communication tool. The fact that the researchers have basic SL skills assisted them in identifying the lived experiences of people who are Deaf in communicating with and hearing people. The knowledge helped to identify perceptions held by people who are Deaf on the learning, teaching and use of SL by hearing people with a view to inject understanding between them.

### **Targeted Population and Samples**

The population included all deaf people in the streets of Harare urban and the directors of the two DPOs which included the NASCOH and ZIMNAD. Harare urban streets were selected for this study because of the observed density of the population of people who are deaf and operated as street vendors. The sample was purposively selected. Participants who were self- claimed or claimed by their colleagues to be profoundly Deaf were selected for the study. People with profound Deafness are people with 90+ db hearing loss who may not benefit from the use of a hearing aid. Participants were selected from the Harare urban streets. Anyone meeting the criteria automatically became part of the population. Purposive sampling was preferred to ensure deliberate sampling of participants only serving a purpose in the study. The two directors were automatically selected as part of the sample. The DPOs were included to get the general voices of people who are Deaf and at the same time to augment the findings. Age was not taken as a prerequisite since most people who are Deaf started school at varied ages depending on when one obtained educational interventions. The point of saturation determined the number of participants. Thus the study used ten participants with profound deafness to elicit data for this study.

### **Research Instruments**

Semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis were used to obtain information on the perceptions of people who are Deaf on learning and use of SL for communication by hearing people. Open –ended qualitative questions were asked for views and perceptions held by people who are Deaf on learning and communicating using SL by hearing people. The challenges and possible suggestions that could put Zimbabwe on the international map on Deaf education were revealed through the triangulated approaches and probes that verified the views given by participants to help bring understanding or clear misconceptions. The phenomenology design was considered applicable to both the instruments and the triangulated methods because it allowed the debate of actual held views and perceptions to take place in a free and unforced atmosphere. This was considered necessary and important for enhancement of the study's credibility and dependability.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The researchers displayed their SL skills by introducing themselves in ZSL with a view to establish good rapport between themselves and the participants and also to catch their attention. The researchers identified the population from which suitable participants who were profoundly Deaf were selected with the assistance of their streets mates who are deaf. The informed consent of the purposively selected and interested participants was sought. The participants went through in-depth interviews and researchers assisted each other in interpreting the data and agreed on the meanings. Observations helped to verify data. For example, body language and facial expressions were questioned. The participants used SL only or wrote on paper any misunderstood signs or issues. One of the researchers took notes on participants' responses, stories and experiences as they signed and as the research partner gave the interpretations. As participants responded the responses were placed into emerging themes and patterns.

The responses were later discussed by both researchers and placed into further agreed themes. The responses fed into the research questions, objectives and raised assumptions. These were further verified and augmented by triangulated approaches. The approach is generally criticised for not being representative enough. However triangulation gave credibility and dependability to the findings and also probes here and there explained misconceptions thereby minimising the impact of biases. This gave great credibility and allowed dependability on the findings and even generalisability since people who are Deaf are minority. Researchers' presence during interviews may bring about biased responses. In this study this was minimized by probes, questioned observations and document analysis and supportive literature reviews. The related literature supported and argued the findings. The study findings were addressed under discussions and recommendations were deduced from the responses.

## FINDINGS

This section describes the findings. The following themes emerged from the findings: Need for policies; Deafness and identity construction; Sign language communication experiences of people who are deaf on use of SL by hearing people, Disabled People Organisation's (DPOs) experiences and knowledge about SL. Some of the findings are addressed by the research questions under the discussion section.

### Need for policies

All the people who are profoundly Deaf were saddened by the way most hearing people and the teachers taught or are teaching SL. They suggested that it was not the first language of SL users. They further echoed that claiming a language that is not SL to be SL was a sign of disrespect to the Deaf community. One of these participants suggested lack of policy to be the major culprit as follows, 'People are not being taught SL in its own right as the first language of people who are Deaf. To respect us, people who are Deaf and our language, please teach SL. This can only occur where there are SL policies. 'Pure' deaf I mean people whose communication medium is 'purely' SL.'

While in conformity to this DPOs said, 'In Zimbabwe SL awaits domestication and we do not have SL policies besides circulars encouraging educationist to use SL to people who are Deaf'. It was revealed that people who are Deaf do not always benefit from means of information dissemination in place in Zimbabwe because of their hearing difficulties. Thus, the DPOs further suggested, 'We lack information dissemination policies for the diversified communities in Zimbabwe. It is a big challenge to people who are Deaf. We therefore need to conference with people who are Deaf to identify policy gaps for the different sectors.'

### Deafness and identity construction

One participant suggested, 'I am Deaf but my parents are hearing. My parents never put effort to sign with me. They write on paper to communicate with me. We share very little. I don't know what they want me to be but I will remain Deaf until I die. Why can't they learn SL? I do not know.' Another participant in a similar predicament echoed, 'It is very disappointing to note that most people who claim to be teaching SL are not teaching SL. If this is left to continue we will not have Deaf people in Zimbabwe. I was born Deaf and I am proud to communicate in SL because it is me. I am Deaf and nothing will change that.' The DPOs confirm this when they said, 'Most young people who are Deaf but cannot sign, but they usually look around for adults in a similar situation to be taught SL or they join the Deaf Culture. Within the culture they join clubs where they are taught how to maintain their identity and friendships.' This indicates that no matter what parents or educationists might want to turn people who are Deaf they want to remain **Deaf** using SL as their means of communication. They want to identify selves with other Deaf groups. This reflects that people who are Deaf are aware of their status and its implications.

### Sign language communication experiences of people who are deaf with the hearing and hard of hearing

The study reveals that people who are Deaf had lots of experiences on hearing people's teaching, learning and communication in SL. In addition to this, they also had vast experiences on people with hard of hearing. One participant emotionally expressed self:

People value their languages and always want words in their languages to be pronounced and used correctly. People do this as a sign of respect to the particular group of people. But I have noticed that people use and sign in SL as they wish and feel. They give excuses to this by saying; **SL is not a universal language.**

Another participant echoed, 'People have no respect to SL. Consult us, first users of SL, that is people who Deaf whenever you carry out trainings or teachings.' Another emotional echo expressed: During primary education SL is put to some good use and practiced in our learning. But as we advance, we are forced to learn oral languages such as, English, Shona and Ndebele. Our educators become less or not interested in SL as our means of communication as we advance in education. This world is very unfair, we did not ask for this impairment but were born with it or just acquired it.

During interviews people who are Deaf complained that people who are hard of hearing at times do not support interests of people who are Deaf in order to please hearing people or compete intellectually with people who are Deaf. The following was expressed about people who are hard of hearing, 'Some people who are hard of hearing use signed languages which follow grammatical structures of spoken languages. This confuses L1 SL users because they talk and sign at the same time.' Here the emphasis is that signed languages should not be treated as SLs. If the differences are not clearly spelt out, such a situation may lead teachers to treat any signs as a homogenous language for people who are Deaf yet signed languages and SL are two different languages. This may have a possibility of confusing people who are Deaf. They further suggested, 'People who are hard of hearing are taken by

the hearing world as better learners and employees because they can talk and articulate in most instances. They are more accepted at colleges than us. We ask colleges to teach us in SL then they will notice our competence.' DPOs highlighted, 'People who are hard of hearing and the Deaf need education and counselling lessons on how they should relate to each other despite hearing loss differences.' Despite all this the major issues expressed are to teach SL as the first language for Deaf users.

In support to the above most participants reported:

We, Deaf people are the owners of SL but most hearing people have taken it from us. They teach it the way they think. They do not consult us because they think we are less educated. Any people who want to train SL should consult and use people who are Deaf and not make assumptions. We need to be involved in the development of the SL syllabi.

The emphasis is to give SL the status, respect it deserves and its right as a language. It should be noted that while signed languages are helpful to people with hard of hearing, its use with people who are Deaf may in most cases bring more confusion to the communicated messages.

### **Disabled People Organisation's (DPOs) experiences and knowledge about SL**

The DPOs suggested:

If you want to see the first language for the Deaf, see what they use when they are out of school or when they are on their own, that's their first language, but people continue to say they should use the English structures, that's not their first language, they are imposing language on the Deaf. As a nation we accept different languages but we do not accept SL as a language in its own right. Let us give SL its rightful respect.

The DPOs noted discrepancies in the Zimbabwean HIV and AIDs SL document and said, '...especially the HIV vocabulary indicated that most signs were either derived from or borrowed from the spoken language perspective.' This is claimed to confuse people who are Deaf.

DPOs revealed that the specialist teachers from Zimbabwean Special Needs Institutions were half backed in terms of SL specialisation. Thus they went on to say,

Most teachers are not confident enough to understand and communicate in SL. They communicate in signed English and when it comes to real SL they do not understand. They cannot get the concepts thus at times they mark the children wrong correct answers according to SL. This is another dilemma which we have. Most teachers learn SL from their pupils who are Deaf.

DPOs further suggested,

In the Ministry of Education SL has been given status on paper, that is equal to Shona and Ndebele but its operational aspects have not been clearly defined. Nobody checks on the type of SL in use. SL is for people who are Deaf and it is not signed English? Which SL are people who are Deaf using in Zimbabwe? This has made the whole subject challenging. And you also find that, for examinations they have allowed teachers to sign to pupils so that they can better understand, and also there is a circular to that effect. Circulars suggest that they should also engage specialist teachers to mark examination scripts for children who are Deaf. It is the practicality of the whole thing that is questioned, whether that is being put into practice or whether it is effective. A lot of questions remain unanswered.

### **Information dissemination**

Interviews with the DOPs were summarised and they revealed that information dissemination can be in various forms, but the key issue is to make sure that the target group, that is, people who are Deaf are taken cognisance of. They further expressed that it is unfortunate that 95% of most children who are Deaf are born of hearing parents. Such children do not usually receive language stimulation from babyhood; the social interruptions sense of sex and the like. The researchers observed that, while hearing people are groomed from babyhood people who are Deaf are left out because the parents think they do not have the means of communicating with them; or they don't know, so they leave them out. They learn most things either by accident or by peer education. Hence nobody seems to care whether they are getting the right information and / or not. Besides all this, they have language gaps which culminate into educational gaps.

The DPOs further expressed that, these days there is a danger that is coming up from grouping people with disabilities together in one workshop or conferences. Although an interpreter may be assigned for people who are Deaf, it still leaves language gaps for people who are Deaf because they lack enough background or basic information about things and issues from babyhood. For example, some may know a belt but no one taught them it's a belt, when the word belt is highlighted and being explained in SL, meaning may be deduced to help them fill in language gaps for the particular concept. This explains that grouping people with disabilities may result in information overload for people who are Deaf. While others with the spoken language may be ahead people who are Deaf will always lag behind and are likely to take long time to fill in the desired language gaps for a particular concept. This is a matter that most people overlook when running grouped workshops for people with varied disabilities. It is a very pertinent issue to people who are Deaf. DPOs suggested, 'Until such a time that we give them language stimulation in the language that they understand from babyhood, they will always have these gaps.' The emphasis is to disseminate information to people who are Deaf in their first language, which is SL, to avoid confusion or misunderstandings.

## DISCUSSIONS

This section explains and discusses how the findings, risings and related literature review answer the research questions.

### Is Sign Language a language?

The study findings reveal that SL is a native language for people who are Deaf as explained by one participant who says, 'I was born Deaf and I am proud to communicate in SL,' and another participants pointed out, 'To respect us, people who are Deaf please teach SL in its own right as the L1 language for people who are Deaf.' This is supported by Chimedza et al. (2007); Mayberry in Davis and Silverman (1978) who assert that SLs are visual languages that use a system of non-manual signs, facial and body movements as the means of communication.

On the one hand McCullough (2000) felt that SLs were given a mystical status which tended to absorb too much time of people who are Deaf. He describes this as having a likelihood of preventing them from buckling down to education to acquire the needed qualifications in the real world. McCullough (2000) argued further that SL is just language of communication that cannot be recognised as an official language because it neither has written forms nor books. The study acknowledges that SL neither has a written format nor books but it a language on its own right. This is supported by the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No.20) (2013;17) Chapter 1 Section 6, sub-section (1), the following languages namely Chewa, Chibarwe, English, Kalanga, Koisan, Nambya, Ndau, Ndebele, Shangani, Shona, **Sign Language**, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda and Xhosa, are the officially recognised languages of Zimbabwe. Bloom and Lahey (1978) further endorsed it as a language. Besides, it is used as a communication and teaching tool at Gallaudet University in United States of America, Japan and in Nordic countries where it has produced graduates, indicating a true reality of its application in Deaf education. Although SL is a visual gestural language with grammatical structures different from the structures of spoken languages, it is a language as positioned by study findings in this study. Instead of speech sounds SL uses signs. For example, Signed Swedish and many others, **are not SLs**, but only coded oral languages. Using visual signs rather than oral signs as means of communication does not make a language less a language (Skutnabb-Kangas and Aikio-Puoskari, 2011). All this confirms SL to be a language.

### How do people who are deaf perceive the learning and use in communication of SL by people who are hearing?

The study discovered that hearing people did not give much respect to SL as a language for people who are Deaf. As a result they sign anyhow just to fulfill their wants or needs. People who are Deaf are displeased by this, thus one participant complained, 'People value their languages and always want words in their languages to be pronounced and used correctly. ...But I have noticed that people use and sign in SL as they wish and feel.' The question is, are we giving such value to SL? The study further revealed that people who are Deaf are annoyed by ongoing claims of SL trainings which are not SLs. As a result most participants said, 'We, Deaf people are the owners of SL but most hearing people have taken it from us. They teach it the way they think.' SLs are completely independent languages and have nothing to do with the oral languages of the countries where they exist (Mayberry in Davis and Silverman, 1978). This is further affirmed by Mayberry in Davis and Silverman (1978) who suggest that Signed English, speechreading and finger spelling are other approaches that can be used to enhance understanding of SL but should not be called SL. Agreeably, Skutnabb-Kangas and Aikio-Puoskari (2011) assert that these are not SLs, but only

coded oral languages. The key point stressed here as observed by researchers is the respect of SL and the people who are profoundly Deaf. There is therefore need to show distinction of those who should use SL and / or signed languages to allow effective teaching and learning of people who are Deaf.

In support of the above subject, DPOs expressed concern over delays in domesticating the acceptance of SL by the Zimbabwean 2013 Constitution. They emotionally revealed, 'We have had Deaf adults especially women in the maternity wards who have been given wrong medication, but this goes on unpublished and unnoticed just because the concerned people are a minority. There are possibilities of death cases from this.' On the other hand, DPOs expressed that, people who are Deaf but found HIV positive are likely to go with their misconceptions and uncounselled too just because the counsellor or nurse cannot sign. The DPOs are suggestive that lack of clear SL policies could be possible contributors to the way the hearing Zimbabweans view SL issues. In this study people who are Deaf cry out for the use of SL in their learning. They echoed, 'We ask colleges to incorporate SL in teaching people who are Deaf then they will notice our competencies.' The implications are that if teachers get to know the discrepancies discussed in this study, they will be able to employ relevant and effective teaching techniques when using SL to specific groups of people with hearing loss without disadvantaging any group of people. The need for SL and information dissemination policies is counted very essential to achieve the required proficiency.

### **How do the revealed perceptions impact on the plight of people who are deaf?**

The study findings challenge us to take positive action in promoting Deaf education and SL teaching, learning and communication in Zimbabwe. Thus, to carry out any SL trainings the study encourages us to consult people who speak SL. This is evidenced by the quotes 'To learn SL consult us the L1 users of the language. People have a tendency to prefer to consult hard of hearing people while we educated people who are Deaf are left out. Why are you not consulting us?' As observed by researchers, the expressed sentiments may produce tension between people who are profoundly deaf and the hard of hearing. Thus the DPOs suggested, 'People who are hard of hearing and the deaf need education and counselling lessons on how they relate to each other despite hearing loss differences.' Indicators are that the hearing people and even people who are hard of hearing should be aware of SL as the first language for people who are Deaf. The study encourages quick domestication of SL in order to give this language the status it deserves and a way forward to educationists. It seems the majority of people who are Deaf are born by hearing parents. This is supported by Mitchell and Karchmer (2004) who approximated that 95% of parents of children with hearing loss are hearing themselves. In this study DPOs also acknowledge, '...it is unfortunate that 95% of most children who are Deaf are born of hearing parents.' DPOs further support this by suggesting, 'Until such a time that we give them language stimulation in the language that they understand from babyhood, they will always have these gaps.' The findings may call for further studies on how we treat hearing parents with children who are Deaf in Zimbabwe. The other issue seemingly being brought out by the study is that children who are Deaf who are from hearing parents have in general low language stimulation and they also experience identity crisis as purported by the study and similarly so in the case of people with hard of hearing. Knowledge from this study is hoped to influence policies, the operational aspects and use of SL in Zimbabwe.

The study reveals that, although SL seems to have a weaker status in society and has less possibility of advancing to a high formal level, it is a language. It is a language because it is used by people who are Deaf in their daily lives than any other language. It is therefore the language they know best, thus it is the first language for people who are Deaf. This is justified by a participant who said, 'I was born Deaf and I am proud to communicate in SL because it is me. I am Deaf and nothing will change that.' SLs are historical languages similarly as oral languages are and some SLs even have a longer pedigree than some oral languages. Arguments based on the study findings purport that those who see SLs as not languages are likely to be based on ignorance of what SLs are. People who are Deaf are proud to speak in their language. In support, Mayberry in Davis and Silverman, (1978) assert that everyone has different approach to presenting English on the hands.

In this study people who are Deaf complain on the care and treatment to SL when they say, '...Teaching through the medium of SL stops at primary education.' This suggests that little care is rendered to communication medium of people who are Deaf at high school or colleges. One participant emotionally expressed self, 'Nobody is questioning what we go through in language learning and communication, even our parents just look on when the world unjustly treats us.' Another participant also said, 'Many meetings, workshops and conferences have been held and are still being held about us and our medium of communication, that is SL, but without positive answers to our plight.' Supportively DPOs suggested, 'Zimbabweans need to be more organised and avoid looking down upon people with profound Deafness as uneducable or less educated.' They further proposed that this may bring subtle division between people who are profoundly Deaf and the hard of hearing. As observed by the researchers, the study therefore urges us to consider one's potentialities and not his/her degree of hearing loss or age of onset as benchmarks to educational admissions.

Most participants said, 'We need at least one university for people who are Deaf where SL is the medium of learning as is ongoing at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. and SL literate teachers.' Indicators are that while people who are Deaf accept their situation of Deafness they are suggesting to the hearing world that with positive institutional and personal attitudes, skills and provisions people who are profoundly Deaf can compete equally with both the hearing and the hard of hearing. The preceding literature informs this study that Gallaudet learnt about Deaf education from others. This encourages exchange programmes. Our systems are encouraged to do the same. However, from the study it sounds that both theoretically and practically there are still many more questions about SL teaching, learning and communication than answers. Indicators are that we are still far from understanding and distinguishing SLs from signed English. One participant emotionally expressed, 'Should we suffer because our biological parents do not know SL? Does being born by hearing parents make a difference to my life? I am Deaf and shall remain Deaf. My parents need support and education in SL.' What do all these expressed sentiments mean to you and me. Emotionally expressed, yes but we are also emotionally and morally challenged by these sentiments. What are we doing to users of SL by teaching pidgin SL? The recognition of SL as a language by the constitution is symbolically important and evidenced in print but the rights are vaguely presented as already alluded by DPOs. For example, which SL shall be used with people who are Deaf? Who shall authenticate that? Many unanswered questions which this study has not addressed remain unaddressed. There are therefore many gaps in this area of study that one may consider for further studies.

### **What mechanisms ought to be put in place to manage the situations?**

To manage the situation described by this study, DPOs suggested:

As associations we think people should come together to decide the plight of people who are Deaf whether they want to come out with SL, signed English or Sign Language or English added signs or Shona added signs or spoken language. Currently there is great confusion in that area. The confusion is making people who are Deaf suffer.

The other mechanism was to consult the concerned people. This is evidenced by DPOs' suggestion:

Thus, the essence of the whole thing of whether you want to come out with SL or signed languages, you need to include the people who use the language. And that is how we can get the language. You should not assume from the spoken language for this will make you misfire, misdirect people, misdirect readers on the essence of SL as a language for people who are Deaf.

DPOs further suggested:

We want SL grammar like in America, when you are writing SL you put everything in capital, then they know it is SL. But when you are writing in ordinary language, you write the way ordinary people do. We have to have that stratification to make sure SL gets its prominence, gets its proper status and also respect for the community which uses that language.

Commenting on written SL, Skutnabb-Kangas and Aikio-Puoskari (2011) pointed out that, most SLs did not yet have writing systems that could be easily availed for the Deaf. This revealed that the necessary resources for reducing them to writing did not exist yet although they could be under plan. Mere allowing the teaching of the language to people who are Deaf seems not enough to support SLs. Although other studies reveal a high negation of the use of sign languages as medium of instruction and lack of recognition of sign languages as official languages in Africa (Akach, 2010), SL remains a language for people who are Deaf. We should bear in mind that linguistic minorities are party of the cultural rich or wealth of Zimbabwe, so that people who are Deaf are linguistic national minority only with missing hearing but equally intelligent, talented and creative.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study findings recommended that:

- domestication of SL be fast tracked to enhance its use by both the public and people who are Deaf and also gain its status like other languages
- SL be taught from babyhood to the highest level as the first language for people who are Deaf

- the government should consider the educational involvement of hearing parents of Deaf children as a critical issue to achieve the desired SL communication results in the family
- SL be recognised as any other languages like Shona, Ndebele and English
- many conferences and workshops be run from which suitable SL teaching and communication information can be drawn from people who are Deaf
- a curricula and syllabi be developed on SL teaching as a subject/course and also for parents with children who are Deaf
- tertiary institutions include components of basic SL education in their training programmes
- secondary and college educators be equipped with SL skills
- the hearing world should be made aware of SL for the survival of Deaf Culture
- SL be taught by government approved competent signers
- further researches are needed where many people who are Deaf are meaningfully involved in SL researches

## CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that people who are Deaf did not only have SL learning and communication perceptions on hearing but also on the hard of hearing. It highlighted SL as the native language for people who are Deaf. There was high emphasis on teaching SL as the first language of people who are Deaf. Signed English, speech reading, finger spelling and many other sign systems were described as not SLs but were suggested as essential to enhance understanding of SL but should not be called SLs. Gallaudet University in United States of America, Japan and Nordic countries are living experiences of using the SLs mode to produce graduates who are Deaf as a reality to Deaf education. The study described hearing people as not having respect for SL as a language for people who are Deaf. The findings call upon us to convene meetings, workshops and conferences with timelines to make sure that tangible outcome(s) are obtained and implemented accordingly. It is also deduced from the study that, using visual signs rather than oral signs as means of communication does not make a language less a language. The study therefore cautions us not to erode the Deaf Culture and its language structures but encourages us to be honest in what we are trying to achieve by educating people who are Deaf while at the same time we robe their right to use SL. It urges us to teach SL as SL. It further suggests that the hearing world should be aware of SL and pidgin SL. It was noted with concern that hearing people keep on wanting to influence SL. However, people who Deaf were noted in the study as the best experts of SL training or teaching. The study findings call for relevant policies to operationalise the learning, teaching and communication of SL as highlighted in Zimbabwean March 2013 Constitution. It emphasises that people who are Deaf subscribe to the philosophy of SL that is enhanced by varied grammatical non-manual features.

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