

Urban Experience: Assessing Sign Language Access in Key Domains in Lagos

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Abstract: *This study investigates the accessibility of sign language in crucial sectors in Lagos, including hospitals, courts, television stations, churches, and political space, and how it significantly impacting the quality of life for the deaf and hard-of-hearing community. The research explores how individuals with hearing impairments access sign language in these domains, relying on data from media interviews, news bulletins, and personal observations. The findings reveal limited access to sign language in these critical areas, highlighting the need to integrate sign language training for professionals in their respective fields. From the data presented in this paper, we conclude that sign language integration in different fields examined, promotes inclusivity and enhance everyday communication for the deaf community in Lagos.*

Keywords: *sign language; deaf community; accessibility, Lagos.*

INTRODUCTION

The motivation for this paper is to explore how deaf people access information in many places essential to the quality of life they (deaf people) live daily. According to Tagwirei (2021), sign language is the primary means of communication for deaf individuals. In Lagos, Nigeria, deaf people face significant communication barriers since most residents, including their families do not know sign language. Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals require daily communication access in various settings like hospitals, courts, religious institutions, schools, and political arenas. Sign language is essential for their participation and access to information. Although 31 countries, mainly in Europe, have recognized sign language as an official language (Timmerman 2015), Nigeria has not followed suit. Human Rights Watch stresses the importance of sign language development for promoting the rights, social welfare, and linguistic freedom of deaf individuals. This highlights the need for minority language rights, including access to sign language, to be recognized and protected by judicial authorities.

In addition to the inability to speak dominant official languages such as English, Igbo, and Yoruba, deaf individuals in densely populated cities like Lagos, Nigeria face various social challenges. With a population of over 15 million, Lagos presents unique

obstacles for the deaf community. While researchers like Yusuf and Fadairo (2013), Dada and Owolabi (2013), Nlem and Anurudu (2013), and Melefa, Adeosun, and Adisa (2013) have investigated language access in different domains (medical, religious, educational, and government) in Nigeria, their focus has been exclusively on spoken languages. There is a significant knowledge gap regarding sign language access, particularly in Lagos, due to Nigeria's prevailing emphasis on spoken languages.

The 1999 Nigerian constitution, as amended, covers the rights of Nigerian citizens, including the deaf, to access their language even as defendants. The Freedom of Information Act 2011 also allows Nigerians access to information, although not specific to any Nigerian language. The Nigerian Broadcasting Code (2014) prioritizes local languages (indigenous sign language included) for community broadcasts, while public and private services have flexibility. The 2023 Nigerian National Language Policy requires at least 60% of broadcast programs to be in local languages (Article 8). Although these National laws support language access, they do not dictate the number of languages. The purpose of these laws is to protect linguistic rights. English is the official spoken language of the court in Nigeria and is readily used; every other language requires special arrangements, especially the Indigenous languages. Nigerian indigenous sign languages are marginalized and underdeveloped. American Sign Language (ASL) and British Sign Language (BSL) are foreign sign languages used in public places. (Asonye 2014).

LINGUISTIC SITUATION IN LAGOS

Lagos State, situated in Southwestern Nigeria, is a multilingual region with a population of approximately 15 million people. Although sign language and Egun are minority languages in this state, they coexist with numerous spoken languages. While spoken minority languages face marginalization, their speakers can opt for the national languages when needed. However, the deaf community is excluded from this option due to the intrinsic nature of sign language and other factors like communication needs and limited access to spoken languages. In some institutions, instructions are provided in Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, and English (Obiorah, 2021), but the deaf community's access to sign language in these settings remains unexplored. This study aims to bridge this knowledge gap by investigating sign language access in critical areas like healthcare, legal proceedings, religious institutions, information dissemination, and governance in Lagos, a city where the deaf community's communication needs have been overlooked.

This research aims to explore the utilization of sign language in key sectors of Lagos, including education, healthcare, religious institutions, television broadcasting, and the judicial system. By investigating sign language communication in these critical domains, this study seeks to understand its role in ensuring the well-being and inclusivity of the deaf community in these essential areas.

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected through a survey of sign language access in the selected key domains through interviews with 7 senior members of various organizations studied (they are not

deaf people). Unfortunately, they do not work closely with deaf people. They make decisions that affect the deaf. (Deaf people were not interviewed). Reports from news bulletins and personal observations of how sign boards meant to alert the public on the availability of sign language interpreters were monitored in various schools, hospitals, and law courts. I also observe sign language interpretation on various television stations, churches, and political events. The direct participant observation technique was employed to give the (hearing) researcher first-hand knowledge of the actual interaction/interpretation of sign language in the various domains selected for this study. Three hours were dedicated to this observation each day that I visited the selected domains. The data were collected from December 2020 to December 2022. In the various domains visited, the actual number of deaf people on site cannot be ascertained except in one of the churches where there were sixty-seven deaf people (both adults and children) present for Sunday church services.

The data collected for this study are analyzed using the qualitative method. The theoretical orientation employed in this study is the developmental communication theory for indigenous language proposed by Salawu (2015). Indigenous language means the first language of the community, both sign and spoken, excluding colonial languages such as French and English, even though they are spoken as official languages in African languages. According to the model of indigenous language for development communication, messages in indigenous language should be gathered in the indigenous language of the people and passed to the speakers using the same indigenous language. This will enable the receiver of the message to understand better. This will also facilitate good communication between the people interacting with one another.

SIGN LANGUAGE ACCESS IN THE HOSPITAL

Deaf individuals in Lagos regularly visit hospitals, seeking unrestricted access to medical care through sign language interpretation or doctors proficient in sign language. However, this study reveals that hospitals in Lagos fail to provide sign language interpreters, and most doctors lack sign language proficiency. One of the hospitals in Ikeja that I visited claimed to offer sign language interpreters but lacks the evidence of such services. The two largest federal and state-owned hospitals in the state fail to ensure effective communication with deaf patients. The Nation's Newspaper (May 22nd, 2013) reported that communication barriers lead to fatal consequences for deaf patients, yet there has been no improvement in the situation. The sheer number of non-deaf patients in these hospitals highlights the alarming fate of deaf individuals during medical emergencies, emphasizing the urgent need for sign language access in healthcare settings.

The Universal Health Law clearly states that everyone has the right to medical care, regardless of their language. For the deaf community, this right can only be exercised through sign language, either by having medical staff proficient in sign language or providing sign language interpreters. Unfortunately, private hospitals face a severe shortage of sign language interpreters, and medical staff who can sign are virtually

non-existent, especially in emergencies. As a result, doctors often rely on relatives and lip reading to communicate with deaf patients, except in rare cases where patients bring their own interpreters. It is crucial that hospitals make interpreters available for deaf patients to ensure accurate diagnoses, appropriate treatment, and quality medical care. Sundos (2018) emphasized that improving communication with deaf patients is essential to prevent medical errors and complications. Hospitals have a greater responsibility to uphold the natural right to healthcare for the deaf community.

SIGN LANGUAGE ACCESS IN THE COURTS

Unlike hospitals, courts do not advertise the availability of sign language interpreters on their premises, and it is unlikely that judges, lawyers, and court staff are proficient in sign language. *The Independent Newspaper* (February 6, 2020) reported that deaf victims of sexual abuse and other crimes in Lagos face barriers in accessing justice due to communication difficulties in courts. The paper highlighted several cases in the Ikeja High Court, Lagos, that have been delayed due to the absence of sign language interpreters. As Justice Sybil Nwaka of the Ikeja Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Court noted in the 2017 case of State vs Emmanuel Umoh, reported by the Independent Newspaper on February 20, 2020:

We (the state) need to get the services of sign language interpreters and we need them as soon as possible... therefore, this court needs to be equipped with sign language instructors, we need the Attorney-General's involvement because we have a lot of cases involving deaf and dumb children that are being defiled. Let the Attorney-General know that defendants need legal aid, as we also have issues with defendants not being represented in court.

A visit to various state high and magistrate courts shows that the situation is still the same. As earlier stated, the 1999 Nigerian constitution, as amended, covers the rights of Nigerian citizens, including the deaf, to access their language even as a defendant. According to Micheal (2016:215):

It is a trite law that where an accused person does not understand official language of the court, an interpreter must interpret correctly to the accused person anything said in the language he does not understand. Simultaneously, there should be adequate interpretation to the court anything said by the accused person. The value and importance of interpretation of proceedings to an accused person are not in doubt.

As mentioned earlier, English is the official spoken language of the court in Nigeria; every other language needs an interpreter and/or a translator. Sign language teaching is not part of the Law school's curriculum in Lagos; therefore, any legal officer that can sign

only learned it on his or her own. There is no evidence that legal officers in Lagos high and magistrate courts know how to use sign language; therefore, sign language access and service can be adjudged to be limited in courts in Lagos. Even deaf lawyers will find it difficult to practice if there is no facility to aid them. The truth is that a stressful legal environment for the deaf will not allow them to thrive and access justice in the state.

SIGN LANGUAGE ACCESS IN BROADCAST MEDIA

In Lagos, only NTA and LTV provide daily sign language interpretation for their evening news broadcasts, with NTA interpreting only the 7 pm news and LTV interpreting only the 6 pm news. While both stations claim to use sign language in all their programs, this is not entirely accurate. Their sign language interpreters, employed by the Federal and State governments, are occasionally called upon to interpret special events and government media broadcasts, such as Presidential media chats and Democracy Day broadcasts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, sign language users benefited from daily interpretation on television during the Presidential Task Force's briefings on Channels TV and NTA, a collaborative effort between the Commission for Persons with Disabilities and the National Broadcasting Commission.

Beyond the instances mentioned earlier, sign language is also utilized in specialized programs like Judge Funke's Moot Court Program, an alternative dispute resolution initiative for Lagos residents. This program, broadcast on TVC and social media platforms, features a sign language interpreter. Additionally, Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministry Television provides sign language interpretation for pre-recorded broadcasts of the Anti-Infirmity Missiles Prayers and Power Must Change Hand Program. However, the interpreter's image is often small, making it challenging for viewers to see and understand the signs clearly, especially from a distance.

The Lagos deaf community, specifically Christians who subscribe to Dove TV, have access to sign language interpretation of most sermons by Pastor E.A. Adeboye in all Redeemed Christian Church of God programs. Deaf viewers can watch the interpreted programs daily. However, aside from a few mentioned stations, most television stations in Lagos, including those owned by churches and private organizations, fail to employ sign language interpreters. This neglect has led to complaints from the deaf community's representatives. In response to these complaints, the former Minister of Information, Mr. Lai Mohammed, made the following statement, as documented below:

"I am very touched by the contribution of the young lady who said there is a need for sign interpreters during the network news and other major news belts, ... I am going to ask the NBC to direct all our television stations to ensure that there are sign interpreters in all television stations during their major news hours. This will not apply to only the Nigerian Television Authority. Whether public or private television stations, they must comply with the directive. This directive will work both ways. It means the

complaint of exclusion will be tackled and the persons with disability of hearing will also be included in programmes and policies of government”.

The federal government has yet to issue and enforce a mandate requiring television stations to incorporate sign language interpretation. Even if such a directive were to be implemented, its success would hinge on television stations hiring and training sign language interpreters, which would necessitate significant investment and resources. Currently, both the Nigerian federal government and the Lagos state government appear to be lacking in their commitment to prioritizing this initiative.

SIGN LANGUAGE ACCESS IN RELIGIOUS PLACE

This section focuses on the church, as sign language interpretation is nonexistent in the Muslim community in Lagos. A few churches in Lagos have embraced sign language, notably the Christian Mission for the Deaf in Apata Street, Somolu, which exclusively uses sign language. Founded by American Missionary Andrew Foster in 1970, the church was officially inaugurated in 2017 and provides a space for the deaf community to socialize and worship in their native language. Additionally, St Brigid's Catholic Church in Ijeshatedo, Surulere, offers sign language interpretation for deaf parishioners during Mass, while the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Ebutemeta, led by Pastor E.A. Adeboye, provides interpretation services for the deaf in all their programs. Furthermore, the Talking Finger Ministry, a department within The New Frontier Church in Lagos, also caters to the deaf community.

Sign language facilitates communication and interpretation for the deaf in these churches, as the church leaders are proficient in sign language. Beyond these churches, the Bible Society of Nigeria responsible for producing the Bible is also working to provide video resources for deaf and hard-of-hearing Christians. In a recent online report, Mr. Zacchaeus Gbolade noted:

The Bible Society of Nigeria, BSN has completed the translation of additional 77 Chronological Bible Stories, CBS in Nigerian Sign Language for the deaf. The Sign Language Bible, which is in video format and available on memory stick, is designed to meet the scriptural needs of the hearing impaired the Bible stories, though expensive, are distributed free of charge to the deaf community. ... The first 77 Chronological Bible stories for the deaf were dedicated in 2014. 33 more stories were added in 2017, additional 35 in 2021 bringing the total number of CBS to 145. With the completion of additional 77 Bible stories, we now have 222 Chronological Bible Stories in the Nigerian Sign Language. Translation work is ongoing as we are now set to commence the translation of the New Testament for the deaf. The Bible Society of Nigeria is committed to breaking any known barriers that make the word of God inaccessible to the people. The sighted, the

blind and the deaf now have unhindered access to the word of God in Nigeria, to the glory of God.

While a limited number of churches, such as RCCG, MFM, Catholic, and Christian Mission for the Deaf, are making a conscious effort to include sign language interpretation in their services, most churches in Lagos neglect to provide this essential accommodation. Despite the numerous churches in Lagos, only a handful have embraced sign language, hindering effective evangelism, discipleship, and doctrine learning among the deaf and hard-of-hearing community. As Tagwirei (2021) aptly puts it, 'The church should approach the deaf not as impaired individuals but as people with unique contributions to share with others'.

SIGN LANGUAGE ACCESS IN POLITICAL SPACE

Lagos has never had a deaf political leader, unlike other parts of the world where deaf individuals have held political offices, such as Rachel Arfa in Chicago, Jack Ashley in Stoke, Amanda Folendorf in Northern California, Gary Malkowski, Canada's first deaf parliamentarian, and Mojo Mathers in New Zealand. Deaf individuals in Lagos aspire to participate in politics and serve humanity like their hearing counterparts but face limited opportunities due to linguistic barriers, not lack of qualification. Although data on deaf voter turnout is unavailable, there is a growing demand for the enforcement of deaf political rights in various Nigerian states. For instance, the deaf community in Anambra State protested against denying their voting rights before the 2017 governorship election.

If sign language is not developed and utilized as a medium of communication in governance, the deaf community will continue to face exclusion from the political process. Currently, among Nigeria's 18 registered political parties, only APC and PDP use sign language interpreters during presidential rallies, while senatorial, governorship, and house of assembly campaigns neglect to provide this essential accommodation. However, Lagos State is making a positive stride by training selected civil servants in basic sign language skills to enhance interaction with the deaf community. The General Manager of Lagos State Office for Disability Affairs, Mr. Oluwadamilare Ogundairo, has expressed a supportive stance, recognizing that individuals with hearing impairments are equally human and deserve inclusive communication. He emphasized that sign language is a fundamental aspect of human communication and a vital part of Lagos' identity, ensuring no one is left behind.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Nigerian Constitution of 1999 guarantees the right to access information, yet sign language users in Lagos face significant barriers in accessing language and communication in various domains. This daily challenge can be addressed by adopting strategies employed in countries that respect the linguistic rights of the deaf, such as hiring sign language interpreters or integrating sign language into different domains for seamless communication. For instance, Zimbabwean hospitals have

introduced sign language training for medical officers to bridge the communication gap with deaf patients (Nyakanyanga, 2017). Research emphasizes that linguistic barriers are the primary obstacle faced by the deaf community (Souza et al., 2017; Orrie & Motsohi, 2018). Therefore, the use of sign language is essential to ensure inclusivity and access to basic rights and welfare for the deaf population.

Governments and organizations have recognized the challenges faced by the deaf community, leading to various local and international legislation aimed at preventing discrimination against them. Examples of such legislation include the 1971 Declaration of the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons and the 1975 Declaration on the Right of Disabled Persons (Sands, 2010). While these legislations are not exclusively focused on the deaf population, they pave the way for governments to enforce sign language access in critical areas that impact the daily lives of deaf individuals in Lagos. Despite translating the Nigerian Constitution into several indigenous languages, the government has not translated any section into sign language, leading to the marginalization of sign language and its exclusion from key domains like media, education, healthcare, religious institutions, judicial centers, and political processes in Lagos. It is imperative for the government and authorities to take responsibility and provide solutions to alleviate the suffering and communication challenges faced by the deaf community. As highlighted in this paper, sign language interpretation, which enables sign language access, is grossly underutilized. The deaf community is often invisible, but enhanced use of sign language can significantly improve their experiences in these critical areas.

However, important questions remain unanswered, such as whether interpreters possess the necessary signing skills, considering the localized nature of sign language in Lagos' deaf community. Moreover, the deaf community's comprehension of messages through interpretation has not been adequately addressed. Who ensures the accuracy of interpretations, and what is the benchmark for an interpreter's vocabulary and competency to handle diverse topics? The lack of skilled interpreters has resulted in inaccurate and incomplete information. To ensure sign language access in Lagos, it is essential to have highly qualified, skilled interpreters, both hearing and deaf, working in key domains. Although advocates have pushed for sign language interpretation to be included in Nigerian school curricula, this has yet to be implemented. The deaf community in Lagos requires versatile interpreters proficient in both indigenous and non-indigenous sign languages, who can work in various fields. As Asonye Emma (2014) emphasized, trained interpreters must be prepared to work in any field at any time. This study urges the state to prioritize comprehensive sign language education for its residents.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Obiorah Kenneth Ekeize B.A, LLB, M.A, PhD. is a linguist and researcher affiliated with the University of Lagos, Nigeria. His research focuses on linguistics, language education, and cultural studies, with a particular emphasis on Nigerian languages and indigenous cultures. Kenneth has authored several publications on topics such as language use in COVID-19 discourse, discourse Elements in Igbo radio news, the linguistic

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