

## 4

**SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS: CHALLENGES FACED AT FIELD SETTINGS****Ishari Gunarathne***Lecturer, School of Social Work, National Institute of Social Development*

**Abstract:** Communication is the process individuals share information, facts, feelings, emotions and knowledge. Physical inability could constraint one's communication and that has a prospect to discontinue communication. Individuals with speech and hearing impairments enable communication through Sign Language. Therefore learning and teaching of Sign Language is significant to increase the communication among people with speech and hearing impairments. The role of Sign Language and interpreters recognized as prominent in Sign Language practice and development. The educational interpreters in any given context need to be identified as professionals and competent in required knowledge and skills to maintain the minimum standard of the profession. In present Sri Lankan context there is an increase of the persons with hearing and speech impairments and only limited professionally qualified interpreters and training courses are available. This paper therefore aims to provide an overview of the development and provisions of field education services available

for followers of Sign Language Diploma conducted by National Institute of Social Development in Sri Lanka. Data for the study was gathered through in-depth interviews with purposefully selected 15 Sign Language Diploma followers and Key Informant Interviews were carried out with qualified Interpreters. The findings of this study indicated, Regional Differences in Sign Language Interpretations, absence of National Standardization for Sign Language, Code of Ethics violation in practice, protecting privacy and confidentiality, Lack of language practice and teaching in the primary education standard, priority for lip reading practice than learning signs with less professional recognition for the language and interpreters. The study derived following recommendations to enhance the standard of the interpreters, proper training and recognition for interpreters, teaching sign language at primary level at schools and maintaining national standard of the sign language.

**Key words:** Interpreters, Speech Impairment, Sign Language, Communication

## **INTRODUCTION**

Sign Language which is identified as the official and formal communication mode for people with hearing and speech impairment became official language in Sri Lanka in the year 2017. Sign Language is a primary way of communication for deaf and dumb people that uses hand and arm movements, facial expressions and eyebrow movements to express the thought of a speaker without speaking it (Sharma, 2013). According to the Ministry of Social Empowerment, Welfare and Kandyan Heritage approximately there are 400,000 of people out of 21 million of population with hearing impairments and gradually the number is progressing. With the increase of the number of people with hearing and speech impairments facilities and welfare provision need to be increased in the areas of health, education, social security, employment opportunities and accessibility to other social needs. This study primarily examined therefore the sign language practitioners' availability in Sri Lanka with special reference to opportunities available for them to further their career and personnel advancements. Addition to the main problem, as a subdivision, challenges faced by interpreters was examined in relation to practice field settings. As mentioned in the Disability Policy in Sri Lanka there are 25 schools to cater for students with special education needs with specialized teachers and sufficient facilities. Moreover, charity based and non-governmental organizations are also a part of this process with less recognition and support from the government. Therefore it is significant to analyze the status of the physical and human resources available at these institutions and more specifically human resource development in qualitative and quantitative aspects, moreover, available opportunities to obtain qualifications, interest of those to pursue their career as interpreters and challenges they faced at field settings ix examined in the study.

## **Methodology**

This study employed qualitative methodology and the population represented in the study was the Sign Language Diploma followers at the National Institute of Social Development, Sri Lanka. This Diploma course in Sign Language commenced for the first time in Sri Lanka by the National Institute of Social Development and the course enrollment was 42. From the total population, 15 students selected for this study based on the following selection criteria,

- Performance at the Field Setting
- Field Agency
- Evaluation of the Faculty Supervisor

Further students were scrutinized based on the agency settings as they have specifically assigned for Institutional settings and Community based organizations. These purposefully selected 15 students were interviewed by using an interview guideline; additionally government sign language interpreters were interviewed to explore their experience at field settings. At present government, there are only 07 professional Sign Language interpreters working for the Ministry of Social services and from the total population 2 sign language interpreters focused for the interview. Gathered data were analyzed by employing thematic highlighting method.

## **Results and Discussion**

Sign Language Diploma was commenced in the year of 2017 under the purview of Ministry of Social Empowerment, Welfare and Kandyan Heritage. This Diploma basically designed to open up opportunities for students who are coming from Samurdhi Receiving Families with experience in

working with individuals with speech and hearing disabilities. Through this initiative the government expected to enhance the employability of Sign Language Interpreters in one hand and on the other hand to assist the welfare of people who live under poverty in Sri Lanka.

## **Contemporary Practice of Sign Language Diploma Followers**

### **Career Persuasion**

During the selection of students to follow the Diploma in Sign Language, the priority was given for one significant area and that was the desire to support people with speech impairment, the feeling of sympathy towards the speech and hearing impaired individuals was high among majority of the students. As in other, motivational factor of students and as they expressed this was an opportunity to learn a new language, which they were unfamiliar, and the uniqueness of the language encouraged them to apply for the Diploma. As mentioned by Capilla, 2012, Sign Languages are quite hard to learn; therefore it requires a careful and systematically organized practice. As respondents mentioned, due to less number of interpreters, following a Diploma which is recognized as a professional qualification will be a credential to pursue their career as Sign Language Interpreters. In Sri Lanka there are only 07 Sign Language Interpreters who work in the Department of Social Services, and out of the total there is only one interpreter for Tamil language which is an area where the government attention is essentially required, according the information discussed with these interpreters the main qualification to enter the field as Sign language interpreters was the Diploma in Sign language completed at the National Institute of Education, accordingly there are only two institutes in Sri Lanka to follow the Diploma in Sign language as National Institute of Education and National Institute of Social Development.

### **Field Agencies**

Field Practice which is an integral part of the Diploma in Sign language provides an avenue for students to practice classroom learning's. Field practice enhances the student's application of classroom learning in practical settings. In this Diploma students were specifically assigned to two types of settings, as open community based and institution based. In Sri Lanka according to the Ministry of Social Empowerment, Welfare and Kandyan Heritage there are 25 Special Schools and in these schools Sign Language teachers have being positioned to educate the language to students with speech and hearing impairments. Majority of Students of the Diploma course were assigned in these schools and the remained assigned in community based field settings.

### **Contemporary Practice of Sign Language**

According to the findings of the study it was reported that majority of the Sign Language interpreters both in community based and institutional settings tend to use informal signs in practice. The practice of lip reading has been a trend among teachers as well as students. The sign language differences among regions could observe and reported in the findings as there were area specific language for certain words this has caused to detriment of the National Standard of the Sign Language. As reported by the Stone, etl, 2007, An Introduction to Sri Lankan Sign Language, Sri Lanka's first-ever conversational sign language dictionary, was published. Volunteers from all over the globe and school staff worked together for many months to choose more than 350 signs, create drawings for each sign, translate all content into Sinhala and English, and assemble materials in a

120-page softcover book published locally. This dictionary has been used by few organizations in Sri Lanka to Schools and families of children with speech disabilities. Further it was reported that there are teachers with lack of practice and these teachers at times have a tendency to depend on students in sharpening their language, the less practice and high reliance on informal signs including lip leading impact negatively on the national standard of the Sign language. This was observed in national level organizations which prominence has given for Lip reading.

### **Opportunities**

To be recognized as a profession, practice is significant and the professionals are required to be practitioners. Field Practice hence broadening the effective practice opportunities for new comers as well as for the professionals positioned in the field. As explained by Marschark, 2005, for many deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, sign language and voice interpreting is essential to their participation in educational programs and their access to public and private services. However, there is less than half the number of interpreters needed to meet the demand, interpreting quality is often variable, and there is a considerable lack of knowledge of factors that contribute to successful interpreting. Therefore opportunities and access for individuals with hearing impairments indeed sharp the effective usage of Sign Language. According to the in-depth interviews completed with sign language diploma followers it was reported that the speed of the communication of Sign language has been improved among majority of the students, this was actually strengthened through the informal and formal communication

“Children who learned in this school would love to associate with us, because with teachers they receive only subject knowledge, they do prefer to share their feelings, emotions with someone, so they like our association”.

The above statement given by the students explained therefore the informal discussion with they had time to time with students in the institutionalized settings have caused to improve their communication speed.

Further the field practice has been an opportunity for students to learn new area specific sign language, certain signs, their meaning, form of the sign were learn by the students from the field practice. Students further explained that practice in the field made us to communicate anyhow with students, as one stated

“We were able to Communicate”

Sign Language was the only option for students to share information with recipients; therefore this field practice was a platform to initiate their communication and improve their Communication. Herath, etl, 2013 identified that, “they communicate with each other using sign languages. Hence, it is considered as the top of the gesture hierarchical taxonomy”. The non-verbal communication associated with Sign Language is the highest and impaired individuals’ utilized high energy to communicate. Additionally students explained that what they learnt in the classroom was applied in the setting and they were able to identify the modification and areas which need to be changed in the theoretical learning’s. Apart from the curriculum and practice students receive knowledge and understanding on needs and rights of people with disabilities, the genuine need to address their

needs, stakeholders in the development of the profession, and the areas which need to be improved. Followings are the areas where the majority of the students were responsive:

01. It's a right of them – They should be able to express their ideas and opinions. Without the language they don't have mode to express their feelings and opinion. It's way of communication in public and private sphere.
02. Sign language is the mode to access for information (Right to information)
03. It strengthened social inclusion as mostly these communities are met to socially exclusion and discrimination
04. Receive awareness on advocacy to preserve their rights and stand against any form of right violation and discrimination

Moreover students were able to practice under qualified Sign language Interpreters where they could able to share their working experiences and their techniques to sharpen the communication ability.

### **Challenges**

Time was the common constraint for all the students who assign for their field work in settings, Three months continuous practice was not sufficient for effective practice. As they explained at least 6 months continuous placement with close field and faculty supervision will help them to achieve more in the field. Further students explained that, it was much difficult to communicate with children, as they further elaborated Sign language teaching for primary students in Sri Lanka has received less attention and this is more severe in Pre School education, absence of Sign Language education in Preschool level and Lack of attention in Primary education has created low level of communication progress among 1-5 years of children, as they experience student of diploma course had a hard time in communication, sharing information with these age category children.

Additionally the practice differences between students and teachers have taken students in a dilemma in accepting the accuracy of language. This was improved negatively with informal practice of lip reading. Students reported that some of the signs of some words are dynamic and it is more often contextualized, in the school what they use might not be using in social gathering, and when they are with peers and friends.

In the aspect of Diploma students practice reported that during a conversation with a service users they tend to look at the face of the person rather observing their nonverbal communication, this was a problem faced by majority of the Diploma followers due to this they missed some important messaged delivered by the service users. During the intervention with individuals and families students' find difficulties in communicating with service user's parents and family members as their families are not much aware and knowledgeable on signs.

### **Application of Code of ethics**

The understanding of Ethical practice among Diploma students were at an average level and according to the findings of the study reported by students the practice of ethics in agencies and

organization is not up to the satisfactory level. As reported some of the organizations where their main clientele is people with speech and hearing impairment even do not follow the basics of preserving the confidentiality of their service recipients. According to Roy, 2000, "Interpreting as an active process between two languages and cultures, and thus, social interaction, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis are more appropriate theoretical frameworks". This emphasizes the fact that interpretation is not just one passive conduit of translating texts by using hands or lips, but more of a serious practice which values and respects one's identity, culture and tradition. The feeling of sympathy towards the service users was visible in the practice as majority of the teachers have shared "ANE PAW" (feel sorry) for their students.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Sign Language to be identified as a National Language in Sri Lanka has been proposed by the Ministry of Social Empowerment, Welfare and Kandyan Heritage. Therefore with the precious initiative taken by the government there are certain areas to be developed for the recognition of this noble profession. As reported there are only 07 national level sign language interpreters for the whole country, and there are only one interpreter for Tamil medium at national level. Further academic qualification opportunities are limited with only two government institutes. It is therefore significant to address the career advancements and training and education opportunities for interpreters. Moreover informal practice and high dependence on lip reading has been negatively impacted on the national standard of the sign language. Furthermore the field level practices which is an integral part of education need to be strengthened according to the findings of the study.

It is required to integrate the sign language teaching practice start from the primary primary education due to difficulties faced by the students in secondary education. Most of the respondents stated that a student feels more confident when they have learned the sign language in their primary education. Further the education system should promote the standard signs instead of the practice of the regional signs. The standard glossary of signs should be introduced to all the schools, institutions and practice of the interpreters to upgrade the standards of the language. The national policy on disabilities has accepted that sign language is more often only language of communication of people with hearing and speech impairment. The cabinet has given the consent to approval to recognize sign language and pass the bill to obtain proper recognition to benefit the people with hearing and speech impairment in Sri Lankan context. Simultaneously the government intervention to provide necessary training for the sign language interpreters to upgrade its standards is necessary. It's been vital for the government to pay more consideration to the people with hearing impairment as it's the only means to empower and advocate their rights.

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