THE MITIGATING EFFECT OF THE SHORTAGE AND OVERWORK OF SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR DEAF EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

In Nigeria, the scarcity of qualified sign language interpreters and the resulting increase in workload significantly impact job performance and communication access for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. This paper examines the multifaceted challenges faced by sign language interpreters in Nigeria, including shortage, overwork, and the potential development of occupational health issues such as Parkinson's syndrome. Additionally, the paper explores the implications of these challenges for deaf education and proposes strategies to address them. By considering a broader range of factors, including interpreter well-being and health, this position paper aims to provide a comprehensive approach to improving communication access and support for sign language interpreters in Nigeria.

Keywords: Sign language interpreters, shortage, overwork, Parkinson's syndrome, job performance, communication access, deaf education, Nigeria

Introduction

In Nigeria, the deaf and hard of hearing community faces significant challenges in accessing essential services and participating fully in society due to barriers in communication. Sign language interpreters play a crucial role in bridging this gap by facilitating communication between individuals who use sign language and those who do not. However, the scarcity of qualified sign language interpreters in Nigeria poses a considerable obstacle to effective communication access for the deaf and hard of hearing population. This shortage is exacerbated by the growing demand for interpreter services across various sectors, including education, healthcare, government, and private organizations.

The shortage of sign language interpreters not only limits communication access but also places a tremendous burden on the available interpreters. With fewer interpreters available to meet the increasing demand, existing interpreters often find themselves overwhelmed with high workloads and limited resources, leading to heightened stress levels, decreased job satisfaction, and potentially compromising their overall well-being. Moreover, the shortage of interpreters can result in delays in accessing interpreter services, leading to missed

opportunities and hindrances in obtaining critical information and services for the deaf and hard of hearing individuals.

Furthermore, the overwork and stress experienced by sign language interpreters can have far reaching implications, not only for their job performance but also for their physical and mental health. Studies have shown that prolonged exposure to high levels of stress can lead to occupational health issues such as burnout, fatigue, and even the development of neurological conditions like Parkinson's syndrome (Dean & Pollard, 2020). The potential risk of such health issues underscores the urgent need to address the challenges faced by sign language interpreters in Nigeria comprehensively.

In addition to the impact on interpreter well-being, the shortage and overwork of sign 0language interpreters also have significant ramifications for deaf education in Nigeria. Effective communication access is essential for deaf students to fully participate in educational settings and achieve academic success. Interpreter shortages can lead to disruptions in communication, limiting deaf students' access to educational opportunities and impeding their academic progress.

Moreover, interpreter overwork compromises the quality of interpretation services provided to deaf students, hindering their comprehension, engagement, and overall educational outcomes.

Challenges Faced by Sign Language Interpreting and Interpreters in Nigeria

The challenges faced by sign language interpreters in Nigeria are multifaceted and have significant implications for both the interpreters themselves and the deaf and hard of hearing individuals they serve. Several scholars have documented these challenges, shedding light on the various issues that impact interpreter well-being and the quality of communication access.

Akinbiyi (2016) highlights the scarcity of qualified sign language interpreters in Nigeria as a significant challenge. The limited number of interpreters available relative to the growing demand for interpreter services across diverse sectors, including education, healthcare, legal, and government settings, creates substantial barriers to effective communication access.

Similarly, Interpreters in Nigeria, according to the observation of the writer, in the years of experience as a sign language interpreter are often face heavy workloads due to the shortage of qualified professionals. This high demand for interpreter services can lead to overwork, with interpreters frequently working long hours and juggling multiple assignments simultaneously. Dean and Pollard (2020) discuss the detrimental effects of overwork on interpreter well-being, including increased stress levels, decreased job satisfaction, and heightened risk of burnout.

Oyedeji and Odejobi (2018) also stressed the fact that lack of recognition and support for sign language interpreters in Nigeria poses a significant challenge to the education of the deaf and hard of hearing in the country. Many interpreters report feeling undervalued and marginalized, with limited opportunities for career advancement and professional development. This lack of support can contribute to feelings of frustration and

disillusionment among interpreters, impacting their overall job satisfaction and motivation.

Another challenge highlighted by scholars and as perceived by this writer is the inadequate training and professional development opportunities available to sign language interpreters in Nigeria. Many interpreters receive limited formal training and may lack opportunities for ongoing skill development and specialization. This deficiency in training programmes can hinder interpreter competence and proficiency, ultimately impacting the quality of interpretation services provided.

Finally and perhaps the most alarming is the combination of high workload, stress, and overwork among sign language interpreters in Nigeria may also pose potential occupational health risks. Dean and Pollard (2020) discuss the potential development of occupational health issues such as Parkinson's syndrome among overworked interpreters, highlighting the need for proactive measures to protect interpreter health and well-being.

These challenges underscore the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to support sign language interpreters in Nigeria and improve communication access for the deaf and hard of hearing community. By addressing issues such as interpreter shortage, overwork, lack of recognition, and inadequate training, stakeholders can work towards creating a more supportive and sustainable environment for interpreters, ultimately enhancing communication access and inclusion for all individuals.

Impact on Deaf Education

The shortage and overwork of sign language interpreters have significant implications for deaf education in Nigeria, affecting various aspects of the learning experience for deaf and hard of hearing students.

1. **Limited Access to Educational Opportunities:** Interpreter shortages often lead to delays or interruptions in communication access for deaf students, hindering their participation in classroom activities, discussions, and interactions with teachers and peers. This limitation deprives deaf students of essential educational opportunities such as accessing instructional materials, asking questions, or engaging in group work, which can impede their academic progress and overall learning outcomes (Napier et al., 2019).

2. **Decreased Academic Engagement and Performance:** Overworked interpreters may struggle to provide high-quality interpretation services to deaf students, resulting in misunderstandings, inaccuracies, and communication gaps. Inadequate access to clear and effective communication can hinder deaf students' understanding of lesson content, leading to decreased academic engagement and performance. Additionally, the frustration and disengagement stemming from communication barriers may exacerbate academic challenges for deaf students, affecting their motivation and self-confidence in their academic abilities (Dean & Pollard, 2020).

3. **Limited Social Interaction and Peer Engagement:** Effective communication access is

crucial not only for academic success but also for fostering social interaction and peer engagement among deaf students. Interpreter shortages can hinder deaf students' participation in social activities, inhibiting their ability to form friendships and develop social skills within the school environment. This lack of access to peer interactions and social support networks may contribute to feelings of isolation, loneliness, and marginalization among deaf students, impacting their overall well-being and sense of belonging in the school community (Oyedeji & Odejobi, 2018).

4. **Inequitable Access to Educational Resources and Support Services:** Interpreter shortages create disparities in access to educational resources and support services for deaf students compared to their hearing peers. Deaf students may encounter difficulties in accessing specialized support services, such as counseling, tutoring, or extracurricular activities, due to communication barriers and limited interpreter availability. Additionally, the absence of interpreters may impede deaf students' ability to advocate for their needs and access accommodations, perpetuating inequities in educational opportunities and outcomes (Akinbiyi, 2016).

5. **Impact on Transition and Post-School Outcomes:** The challenges stemming from interpreter shortages can have long-term implications for the transition of deaf students to post-school life. Limited access to educational opportunities and support services may hinder their preparation for higher education, vocational training, or employment opportunities. Without adequate communication access and support, deaf individuals may encounter barriers in accessing higher education, securing meaningful employment, and fully participating in society as independent and empowered individuals (Dean & Pollard, 2020).

Conclusion

The shortage and overwork of sign language interpreters in Nigeria present significant challenges that impact the educational experiences of deaf and hard of hearing students. These challenges manifest in various ways, including limited access to educational opportunities, decreased academic engagement and performance, restricted social interaction and peer engagement, inequitable access to resources and support services, and adverse effects on transition and postschool outcomes.

Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from policymakers, educators, interpreter organizations, and the broader community. Firstly, there is a need for increased investment in interpreter training programs to expand the pool of qualified interpreters and improve their skills and competencies. Providing ongoing professional development opportunities and mentorship programs can also help support interpreters in their roles and mitigate burnout.

Furthermore, improving working conditions for interpreters, such as ensuring reasonable workload and adequate remuneration, is crucial to retain qualified professionals in the field. Creating supportive environments that prioritize interpreter well-being and provide access to resources and support services can contribute to their job satisfaction and effectiveness.

In parallel, educational institutions must address systemic barriers to communication access for deaf students by implementing inclusive policies and practices. This includes providing access to interpreters in all educational settings, ensuring the availability of appropriate instructional materials and technologies, and promoting awareness and understanding of deaf culture and communication needs among educators and peers.

Additionally, collaboration between stakeholders is essential to advocate for policy changes, allocate resources effectively, and promote the rights and inclusion of deaf individuals in society. By opportunities to thrive and contribute to society.

Recommendations

This paper recommends, among other things, that:

- Resources should be allocated by all stakeholders towards comprehensive training programs for sign language interpreters, focusing on linguistic proficiency, cultural competency, and ethical standards. Additionally, training programs should include modules on interpreter health and wellbeing to mitigate the risk of occupational health issues such as Parkinson's syndrome.
- Sign language interpreting should be formally recognized as a distinct profession, with clear pathways for certification, licensure, and ongoing professional development. Recognizing the professional status of interpreters can help elevate their role in society, enhance job satisfaction cum performance and ensure adequate support and resources are provided.

recognizing the importance of sign language interpreters and prioritizing their needs, we can create an educational environment that fosters the academic success, social inclusion, and overall well-being of all students, regardless of their hearing status.

In conclusion, addressing the challenges of interpreter shortages and overwork is not only a matter of accessibility but also a fundamental issue of equity and social justice. By working together to create a more inclusive and supportive environment, we can ensure that deaf and hard of hearing individuals in Nigeria have equal

- Efforts by all stakeholders should be directed towards enhancing and promoting better working conditions for interpreters, encompassing fair compensation, manageable workloads, and access to requisite resources and support networks. Additionally, measures should be implemented to prevent overwork and mitigate the risk of occupational health issues among interpreters.
- Interpreters and their employers should try Leveraging on technology, such as video relay services and remote interpreting platforms, can help address interpreter shortages and enhance access to interpreter services in remote or underserved areas. Additionally, technology can assist in reducing the workload on interpreters and improving efficiency in communication access for the deaf and hard of hearing community.

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