Speechreading Experiences of Children who are d/Deaf: A case of Harare Urban, Zimbabwe

By

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Research Article

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ABSTRACT

The study explored the speechreading experiences of five people who are deaf and five, hard of hearing born to hearing parents. Speechreading is often used synonymously with the term lipreading though both have similarities and differences. Speechreading is more than lipreading. It is the ability to perceive speech by watching movement of speaker’s mouth and other visible cues such as facial expressions, gestures and message context. This study was driven by the encounters the researcher had with people who were deaf or hard of hearing born to hearing parents. The people complained that their hearing parents blocked them from learning Sign Language, as their first language and forced them to speechread only. Besides, debates and controversies over whether speechreading was an effective skill for communication and learning for people who are deaf or hard of hearing were other factors. A qualitative approach, which applied a case study design, was employed to carry out the study. In-depth interviews, observations and related literature reviews were used to collect data. The study was guided by the bilingual deaf education framework. Collected data was analysed and coded into patterns and themes deduced from the responses. The results of the study showed that, most hearing parents including educationists and siblings forced children who are deaf or hard of hearing to interpret all spoken correspondences and learning through speechreading. Thus, by forcing them to function as hearing people they made them sacrifice their integrity. The actions were concluded to be out of ignorance, thus, the study recommended mainstreaming of bilingual deaf education in Zimbabwean institutions including families.

Keywords: speechreading, deaf, hard of hearing, experiences, bilingual deaf education, lessons learnt, Zimbabwe.

INTRODUCTION

The ear is an organ for hearing. Any infections or injuries to it may cause damages or deafness to its different parts which may impact differently on the use and reception of language. This study explores the experiences of people who are deaf and hard of hearing in using speechreading as a tool of communication and learning. People who are deaf or hard of hearing have varied conditions of hearing difficulty and hearing loss levels. Thus, they may rely on oral-aural, total communication and/or bilingual/bicultural (bi-bi). The uses of the three modes of communication have for decades, undergone waves of popularity with people who are deaf or hard of hearing. It does not however, mean that they are the best methods. The study cautions educationists and any people who work with people who are deaf or hard of hearing to be aware that every person who is deaf or hard of hearing is different from the other. It means every individual has to rely on their own mode of communication that suits his or her hearing loss type. Speechreading is also one of the popular skill which is usually used in combination with other methods to augment understanding of the spoken language. Marschark et al (2006) enunciated that hearing loss led to poorer perception of auditory speech signals and greater reliance on visual information available from the speaker’s face. In line to this, studies by Ronnberg et al, 2013 and Marschark et al (2006) showed that daily practice in visual speechreading by individuals who are deaf are likely to lead to superior, compensatory speechreading or speech understanding skills. This element seems an issue of controversy in this study. In addition to this, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet co-founder of the American School for the Deaf (ASD) in 1817’s research promoted the need for a policy on teaching Sign Language to siblings of a child who is deaf for two reasons. Firstly, the child who is deaf would have a means of communication with siblings and secondly, the hearing siblings would increase their own language proficiency. The issue of siblings also looks subtly addressed. Other studies with hearing babies confirmed that Sign Language is also very beneficial not only to babies who are deaf but also hearing babies. Thus, Barnes (2010) posits that signing and eye contact convey a rewarding reciprocal communication process. However, there are also instances where it is used alone as the main means of communication, which is the focus of this study. For example, it is possible to come
across children who are deaf or hard of hearing born to hearing parents, who use speechreading only as their mode of communication. This study captured some of these experiences with a view to reveal the involved circumstances, their consequences, possible solutions and also create a learning forum for hearing parents with deaf children, educationists, policy markers and the nation at large.

**Background to the Study**

Communication is essential for everybody. To add to this, each individual has a right to communicate in the language he or she best understands such as, the mother tongue or one’s first language (L1). For most people who are deaf, Sign Language (SL) which is their L1 is likely the language they are most comfortable to use in all their day-to-day endeavours including education. The condition of deafness or hard of hearing brings with it many language learning and communication challenges. People who are deaf or hard of hearing have varied hearing losses as already pointed out. The varied hearing losses have varied language learning and acquisition impacts. The study highly acknowledges that parent to child communication plays a pivotal role in all developmental domains of every child including a child who is deaf or hard of hearing. Over 90% of children who are deaf or hard of hearing have hearing parents, who frequently do not have a fully effective means of communicating with them (Vaccari and Marschark, 2006; Mitchell and Karchmer, 2004). The researcher’s experiences as a specialist teacher for people who are deaf and the current status as a lecturer in the Department of Disability Studies and Special Needs Education triggered this study. Literature also drove this study to investigate the experiences of people who are deaf and hard of hearing in using speechreading to acquire information in educational and social circumstances. As highlighted by Vaccari and Marschark (2006) most hearing parents cannot communicate meaningfully with their children who are deaf or hard of hearing. It has been observed that most hearing parents cannot sign, as a result their children who are deaf resort to speechreading. However, not all hearing parents in Zimbabwe restrict their children who are deaf to speechreading only. Although the statistical prevalence about this is unknown, the researcher felt it worthy, to explore speechreading experiences of people who are deaf or hard of hearing born to hearing parents with a view to extract lessons that could generally apply to parenting and educating such children.

The above view, made the researcher question the experiences that people who are deaf or hard of hearing go through. Most people who are deaf or hard of hearing that the researcher encountered expressed great sorrow and communication difficulties with their hearing parents and hearing siblings. They pointed out that they were forced to speechread both direct and indirect family communications in order to understand what was on going in their families. One encounter the researcher had before this study, expressed, “As we were not allowed to go outdoor to mix and play with hearing peers or deaf adults we did not even know that there was a mode of communication called Sign Language.” Most encountered parents expected their children to articulate and to speechread correctly all instructions they gave them. Parental expectations were that a child who is deaf or hard of hearing should always be able to speechread correctly all spoken languages. Is this true? These are some of the misconceptions that this study shall clear. The researcher remembered one of her student echoing her experiences; “My parents always became very angry with me when I could not comprehend their instructions. But my siblings always tried to calmly retell the instruction by demonstrating the expectations.” This applied to the majority of people who were deaf or hard of hearing whom the researcher encountered. All these encounters, observation and related literature review triggered the researcher to explore speechreading experiences of people who are deaf or hard of hearing born to hearing parents with a view to turn the experiences and findings into best practices and also to help hearing parents understand their children.

The study does not wish to enter into methods of communication debates for people who are deaf or hard of hearing but its intentions are to suggest that there are people with some hearing difficulties who may not benefit from Sign Language or hearing aids use but may solemnly depend on speechreading. Hence, for others it is the background circumstances that influence the use of speechreading as the only known mode of communication, thus are forced by circumstances to learn it. How does this force impact on their learning, their life and future is another food for thought? In view to all this, specific modes of communication are likely to be grounded and driven by the philosophy or meta-theory that one subscribes to. As a result a family, school or educational system would go by what it subscribes to.

Speculations suggest that people who are deaf and hard of hearing are best speechreaders as long as one speaks facing them. Some even go further to compare the two groups and suggest that, people who are hard of hearing are better speechreaders than people who are deaf. Is this true? All these sentiments plus being a rarely researched area drove this study to explore speechreading experiences of people who are deaf or hard of hearing in Zimbabwe. Through answering the following research questions the study hopes to address the debates and controversies on the topic:
1) How does a person who is deaf and/or hard of hearing acquire speechreading skills?
2) What are the speechreading experiences of people who are deaf and hard of hearing?
3) What challenges do people who are deaf and hard of hearing face in speechreading?
4) What mechanisms ought to be put in place to manage speechreading demands?

Little was known about the speechreading experiences of people who are deaf and hard of hearing born to hearing parents, thus the researcher was driven to explore the area.

Statement of the problem

The researcher was shocked to learn that, at this stage and time, there are still some hearing parents who restrict their children who are deaf to associate with signers or Deaf peers. This observation plus minimal studies on speechreading experiences triggered this study and questioned why some people who are deaf or hard of hearing used speechreading only as their communication and learning skill yet Sign Language or total communications were there for them? Thus, the study, explored the experiences people who are deaf or hard of hearing go through when restricted to speechreading only to interpret the spoken language and at the same time learn through it.

Purpose of the study

The study’s purpose was to help instill in hearing parents that, the successful future of people who are deaf or hard of hearing was determined by accepting and respecting them as a linguistic minority group. Such an understanding according to this study should be shared between parents and educationists from all educational levels. This should with time cascade to communities and the nation at large. Thus, the study aims to create and at the same time enhance plausible communication skills for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Through narrated experiences the study aimed to express how restrictions to speech reading only impacted on people who are deaf or hard of hearing with a view to put educationists and policy makers in the picture and make them move the motion for bilingual education for both hearing parents and their children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Bilingual deaf education framework

The study is guided by the bilingual deaf education framework. This framework underpins that, applying a bilingual model to the education of people who are deaf and hard of hearing involves consideration of their first language and culture (Enns, 2006). This involves recognising their both Sign Languages and spoken languages as different, distinct languages and valuing them equally. It implies that people who are deaf or hard of hearing should learn Sign Language as their first language and the spoken language, usually in written form, as their second language. Deaf education bilingualism therefore meant that people who are deaf or hard of hearing should learn first and develop proficiency in Sign Language, before facilitating their acquisition of English or Shona /Ndebele as a second language. The study noted with great concern that the hearing parents and siblings of people who are deaf or hard of hearing rarely have Sign Language communication skills. Enns (2006) suggests that, this is likely to limit people who are deaf or hard of hearing’s access to the family’s cultural knowledge and resources. Lack of attempts to learn Sign Language is likely to drive hearing parents to restrict their children who are deaf to learn it. This framework guides this study. Its principle is to create a first language base which in this study is Sign Language, on which the learning of other languages should base. This is expected to make it easier to transfer Sign Language skills to spoken languages.

Related literature review

This section reviews related literature on speechreading experiences of people who are deaf or hard of hearing. The bilingual deaf education framework discussed in the preceding section guides this study.

Definition of the term speechreading

Many people are familiar with the older term lipreading, which literature claims not to describe what exactly takes place. Lipreading is the ability to recognise the different sounds of speech by observing movements of lips, tongues and jaws. However, literature prefers speechreading as a wider concept. Speechreading is the ability to understand a person by watching the movements of the face and body and use the information provided by the situation and the language accurately. Supportively, Beta (1990) says it is the ability to perceive speech by; (1) watching the
movements of a speaker's mouth, (2) by observing all other visible clues including facial expressions and gestures, and (3) using the context of the message and the situation.

Speechreading is therefore not just reading lips. People who rely on it interpret the whole face, lips, eyes, checks, eyebrows, jaws and what the whole facial expression is revealing. This, then justifies why over-dressing the face may distract people who are deaf from speechreading and interpreting the spoken words correctly. Supportively, Kyle et al. (2009) describe speechreading as a skill which is required for people who are deaf to access the language of the hearing community. It is a skill used by most people who are deaf and who have hearing parents. Thus, for many people who are deaf speechreading is the main access to the spoken language of the hearing community (Kyle et al., 2009). In other words it is the art of being able to see and interpret speech sounds and sounds (Hanson, 1989).

Cued speech

The study found Kyle et al. (2009)’s explanation of cued speech easy to understand. These authors define it as a manual system which uses hand shapes near the mouth to make speechreading easier. They further enunciate that it is mostly used by people who are deaf or hard of hearing and their teachers. It gives a visual picture of the speech sound and the sounds through the visual code. Cued speech is designed to show words as they are exactly spoken. It differs from speechreading and/or Sign Language because it uses only 8 hand shapes that are combined with 4 hand placements to communicate consonants and vowel sounds that make up the speech (Deaf websites, 2013; Better Health, undated online article). The combination of mouth movements plus hand shapes and placements help people who are deaf or hard of hearing to learn speech sounds and develop speech recognition. According to Deaf websites (2013), cued speech fills in the missing pieces of the puzzle that is often left out by non-verbal communication. It can aid in the development of speech and language skills. Its users are reminded to note that, it is a finite system which does not change as most Sign Languages do overtime.

Cued speech is easier to learn than Sign Language and even speechreading itself as advocated by Deaf websites (2013), Better Health (undated online article) and Hanson (1989). It is a communication skill which can be used in combination with other types of auditory and signed communications. This term is given space in this study to address the misconception about its relationships with speechreading. It therefore means that cued speech helps people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing to understand spoken languages. It also allows the person to make out sounds and words using other building blocks, such as speechreading (lipreading) or auditory training (listening).

Speechreading processes

Speechreading is the skill of understanding speech by watching the speaker’s actions. In relation to deafness, speechreading decodes the language of a speaker by paying close attention to the face and mouth without hearing the speaker’s voice (Hanson, 1989). Most fluent speakers of a language are able to speechread to some extent due to familiarisation and prior knowledge. Indicating that speechreading of unfamiliar languages has high possibilities of misinterpretations. This is because each speech sound or phoneme has a particular facial and mouth position or viseme (Vaccari and Marschark, 2006; Hanson, 1989). As a result people can to some extent deduce what phoneme has been produced based on the visual cues even where sounds are not available.

Hints in speechreading

A person who is deaf or hard of hearing therefore needs to see the speaker’s face clearly. The related literature reviews put a lot of emphasis on the face-to-face position if the speechreading skill is to be of benefit to both the hearing speaker and the person who is deaf or hard of hearing. Speechreading can only occur efficiently in face-to-face situations with good lighting. To enable a person who is deaf or hard of hearing to speechread there is need to attract their attention before lessons or any conversation starts. In view of this, Wood et al. (1986) suggest, to avoid divided attention, speakers should give alert signals to people in their midst who are deaf or hard of hearing. Everyone, including the hearing public utilises some degree of speechreading in communication in day-to-day conversations. Some circumstances encourage it more than others, for example, noisy environments inevitably encourage its use. However, the greater a hearing loss, the more a person tends to rely on vision for understanding speech (Tye-Murray, 2004). People with mild to moderate hearing losses using hearing aids may depend more on hearing than vision whilst at the same time they may not be able to hear many speech sounds no matter how loud the sounds are made. In such cases they would use both hearing and vision, for example, sounds, ‘s’, ‘sh’, ‘t’, ‘th’. These sounds are relatively easy to see, so a combination of speechreading and aided hearing is the most effective method to follow speech (Tye-Murray, 2004; Calvert and Silverman, 1983). A person with a severe to profound hearing loss may not be able to get sufficient help from a hearing aid to understand speech but may depend primarily
on speechreading, Sign Language or both. As observed by researcher, whether one has mild, moderate, severe or profound hearing loss, one should be free to use a mode of communication he or she is comfortable with.

The following hints can help one distinguish one sound from the other especially those that seem to look similar on place of production but sounding differently. For example: 1) one needs to increase the duration production of the nasal sound /m/ to distinguish it from the bilabial sounds /p, b/, and /n/ to distinguish it from a lingua-alveolar sounds /t, d/. 2) Place the tongue between the upper and lower teeth to clarify /th/. 3) Spread the lips, clench the teeth firmly and grin to indicate /s, z/. 4) Bite the lower lip with the upper teeth to indicate /f, v/. 5) Move the jaw down briefly while producing /k, g/. 6) Shrug the shoulders briefly during the inhalation preceding /h/. 7) Increase or decrease height/width of the lip opening while producing vowels (Tye-Murray, 2004; Calvert and Silverman, 1983). In group tasks there is need to keep the person who is deaf or hard of hearing aware of who is speaking next before the speaker talks and also indicate topic changes and make sure the changes are noted.

Benefits of speechreading

When a person cannot hear or sign, speechreading is the only avenue besides written communication. It seems to fasten to speechread than to use writing to communicate. Better Health (undated, online article) reminds us that if well comprehended, speechreading offers great and rich information. It further posits that, in our day-to-day communication hearing people use it to supplement what they hear with what they read when in noisy environments or interpreting information from soundless video tapes. Speechreading helps people who are deaf or hard of hearing with prior hearing experiences to interpret or make near correct guesses of the spoken words or sounds especially when familiar with the context. Do people who strictly depend on speechreading benefit? It is a controversial issue and at the same time a very difficult question to answer. However, Braswell-Burris (2010) asserts that, it is a well-established fact in the field of deaf education that the students who are deaf born to deaf parents are more likely to succeed academically than those born to hearing parents. As observed by the researcher, although speechreading has benefits over other skills in deaf education, its sole use leave a lot of questions unanswered.

Speechreading challenges

Communication is very essential in a family. It binds all children to their parents and society whether deaf /hard of hearing and/or hearing. Communication also breeds communication. Some people who are deaf or hard of hearing depend on speechreading as already alluded and shall further be discussed. Speechreading can be an efficient skill on its own that can help a person who is deaf or hard of hearing understanding speech. This highly depends on prior language or its familiarisation to the person who is deaf or hard of hearing. However, because so many speech sounds look alike on the lips and others are invisible such as ‘k’ and ‘h’ have no visible lip-shape (Wood and Webster, 1991) misinterpretations may be experienced in some cases. Alexander Graham Bell coined the term homophone to describe words which look alike but do not sound alike, for example, the words ‘pat’, ‘mat’, ‘bat’. A child who is deaf or hard of hearing therefore needs to see the speaker’s face clearly in order to tell sounds or determine used vocal organs and guess the word or sound. This continues to further justify why people who are deaf or hard of hearing, who depend on speechreading cannot take notes and watch a speaker’s face at the same time. This is likely to make them lag behind and fail to keep track of the conversation or events.

According to Tye-Murray (2004), there are four key areas that may pose speechreading difficulties to people who are deaf or hard of hearing. They may include the nature of speech, the speaker, environment and the speechreader. Voiced or unvoiced speech sounds formed on the lips and/or the front of the mouth may not be detectable easily through speechreading. For example, /p/ might be easier to read though also easy to confuse with /b/. In contrast, it is very difficult to speechread sounds formed at the middle of the mouth such as, ‘t’ or the throat vocal sound, ‘k’. Under usual viewing conditions, an estimated 60% to 70% of speech sounds are obscure or invisible (Tye-Murray, 2004) for example, k, g, h - so that homophones such as Kate, gate and hate would all look the same and difficult to identify. The Victorian Deaf Society (undated online article) supports this by the following excerpt from a conversation: Mr. A (deaf): By the way, how is your brother? Mr. B: My brother was buried last week. Mr. A (deaf): How wonderful! You must be pleased about that. Here terms ‘buried’ and ‘married’ are misread. They are homophone sounds as previously defined by Alexander Graham Bell. Indicators are that while speechreading is a commonly successful communication skill it has its challenges as observed by the above conversation. It calls for cross-checking to make sure that the correct message is decoded. It also corrects the taken for granted notion by most hearing people that people who are deaf or hard of hearing can always speechread all spoken conversations correctly.

Speakers can enhance the visible cues for speech but some people’s speaking habits or features may make it very difficult for speechreaders, for example a moustache or beard, overdone make-up, too big earrings, exaggerated speech, talking too fast or too slowly, just to mention a few (Tye-Murray, 2004). All these and many
others may create speechreading difficulties for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Poor lighting that is shining into the speechreader’s eyes rather than on the speaker’s face is a problem. Distractions in the environment can make concentration difficult for the speechreader. The innate ability to speechread varies from person to person as already highlighted in preceding paragraphs. This can only be improved to a certain extent by training. To enhance speechreading as a communication skill, any visual defects identified should always be corrected if health communication is to take place. A speech reader must be attentive and watch the speaker closely although it is a tiring exercise when a whole thing (Better Health, undated online article). The speech reader needs to be prepared to guess, fill in the gaps and accept the fact that he/she is not going to be able to get every word correct (Tye-Murray, 2004). Vaccari and Marschark (2006) assert that there is abundant evidence indicating that children who deaf or hard of hearing who participate actively in natural linguistic interactions with their parents from an early age are most competent in social, cognitive, and language development.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was employed. Qualitative methods of data collection, such as in-depth interviews and observations were used to frame and structure the responses of the selected participants. A case study design was applied because it gave specific in-depth insights, as supported by Yin (2003), to why and how people who are deaf or hard of hearing who came from hearing families (parents and guardians) learnt and used speechreading as a skill of communication or learning. Further to this, the design afforded the researcher the opportunity to explore and describe the phenomenon in its context using a variety of sources which Baxter and Jack (2008) consider to give complex interventions to phenomena being studied. This ensured the exploration of the issue under study through a variety of lenses which gave room to triangulation. This also helped to reveal the essence of the phenomenon. The two methods were supported by relevant and related literature reviews. Semi-structured interview questions were used to collect the data. Using an in-depth analysis and purposively sampled, five people, who are deaf, and five hard of hearing born to hearing parents the study explored their speechreading experiences. Selected participants gave their informed consent. They were then given confidentiality assurance by the researcher. This made participants open up to questions and probes. The case study was selected as the best design for this study to assist in learning the complexities involved in using speechreading skill to interpret the spoken language and it also gives a holistic view of the situation.

The study population included all vendors who are deaf or hard of hearing in the streets of Harare, Urban in Zimbabwe. Harare was selected as the scope of the study because of its proximity to researcher and observed sudden high influx of people who are deaf or hard of hearing operating as street vendors influenced the limitation to this city. To participate in the study one had to be a person who is deaf or hard of hearing; had communication background of having once communicated only in speechreading; had hearing parents and was interested in the study. The study could not be carried out without the participation of the mentioned specific participants in order to make decisions to the topic. The sample of the study was selected from the streets of the city of Harare in Zimbabwe. Streets populated by street vendors who are deaf were visited. People who are deaf were then, confronted and told the intention of the street talk. The researcher did not have problems in establishing rapport since she possessed basic Sign Language skills. Boundaries to participant selection were explained and volunteers who are deaf suggesting the boundaries came upfront to have their names listed. The first people who were deaf and other first five who were hard of hearing who met the criteria were then selected to participate in the study. Data was analysed as participants shared with researcher their lived speechreading experiences. The process of the study was guided by the case study proponents such as, Baxter and Jack (2008); Yin (2003); Stakes (1995) and Miles and Huberman (1994).

Data was analysed using patterns and themes deduced from the responses. Limitations to this study included time consuming and researcher bias. In addition to this, the sample was not representative of the population. However, despite this, generalisations may be drawn since the population of people who are deaf or hard of hearing are minority and it also depends on the subject and available content on the subject. The study sought accounts on the subject from three perspectives, namely in-depth interviews, observations and supportive literature. The study used probes and triangulation to check for consistency in given responses against the related literature reviews. Researcher bias was minimised through triangulation. In view to all this findings credibility and trustworthiness was therefore entrusted.

Study findings

The section describes the findings and discusses them according to emerging patterns and themes. It further explains the extent to which the obtained data answers the research questions.
Themes and patterns drawn from the study included; speechreading restrictions for children who are deaf by hearing parents, speechreading misconceptions, call for alternative means of communication by people who are deaf or hard of hearing and isolation and identity confusion.

Speechreading restrictions for children who are deaf by hearing parents

The patterns and themes deduced from this study reveal that most hearing parents who had children who are deaf or hard of hearing were negatively affected by the birth of such a child or a child who developed such impairment in later life. It seems most hearing parents tried as much as they could not to share their predicament with their neighbourhood by restricting the movements of their children who were deaf and detecting their play mates. This is explained by the quote… *not allowed to go outdoor to mix and play with hearing peers or deaf adults* …The parents pretended to be overcoming their communication challenges with their child who was deaf by not allowing the child to associate with Deaf adults or peers. They seem to express that they did not want their child who was deaf to learn Sign Language as well. They probably thought that by making their child associate with the hearing he or she would one day be hearing. Or this was going to teach her or him to articulate, and then the hearing world would not label the family as having a child who is deaf. A lot of research gaps and assumptions may be drawn from this. This is further explained by one participant who said:

> My parents forced me to attend both my primary and secondary education at schools for the hearing. The excuse was *we want to monitor your health*. I told them that I was only deaf and not sick. But they kept on saying *your health needs our close monitoring*. It meant that I had to continue struggling with speechreading in order to understand all that I learnt and had to communicate my needs through writing.

The researcher’s encounters in the background section also supports what participants echoed, *My parents became very angry with me when I could not comprehend their instructions. But my siblings always tried to calmly retell the instruction by demonstrating the expectations*. From these excerpts one can deduce parental overprotection and misconceptions about deafness. The excerpt further reminds its readers, parents with children who are deaf and people who are deaf themselves that if supplemented, for example, by demonstrations or Sign language, speechreading is a reliable communication skill.

Speechreading misconceptions

One student who is currently undertaking a Post-Graduate Diploma in Teacher Education at one of the universities in Zimbabwe reported:

> One of the lecturers did not take cognisance of us in his lectures although he was aware of our situation and presence in his class. As a result we did not understand what he taught. In between his lecture poses, we asked our course mates to explain issues we did not understand. The lecturer confronted us and told the course mates not to spoon-feed us by telling us what he had taught. He told us that we should speechread and should not depend on other students. I was hurt and I still hurt by this.

This may be taken to mean that, whatever methods the lecturer used, he was prepared to spoon-feed hearing people rather than spoon-feed people who are deaf or hard of hearing. It could at the same time be viewed as a negative attitude towards people who are deaf. One participant said, *When I was at home and school I was forced to use speechreading. Nobody could sign. I was send to a hearing school where I had to daily depend on speechreading only. But when I started to work I began to socialise with other Deaf adults. I also started to learn Sign Language*. Another participant suggested, *People do not understand us when we say Sign Language or speechreading requires visual attention. When in dialogue with us, we need to face each other to enable us, the deaf to read what you are saying in relation to the subject under talk*. The hard of hearing participant who depended on speechreading expressed, *“We are the most disadvantaged because people take it for granted that all speech-readers can understand all spoken language through applying speechreading cues only. We misinterpret many times.”* In support, another participant reported, *“People always enjoy and laugh at our misinterpretations or misunderstandings. They never demonstrate their intentions but just leave us in that situation. No learning takes places in such situations.”* The study depicts that despite the education that teachers have they hold a lot of misconceptions about speechreading by people who are deaf or hard of hearing. They think that every person who is deaf must always be able to speechread despite his or her hearing loss. As observed by the researcher these are great misconceptions and signs of ignorance on deaf education. The findings portray that hearing people fail to understand that every person who is
deaf is a unique individual with own learning needs that are different from any other person who is deaf or hard of hearing.

Call for alternative means of communication

One interviewee complained:

We, people who are deaf have to persevere throughout our education. We learn using communication skills that are favourable to hearing people. Can any of you hearing people speechread from one lesson to the other with small breaks? I appeal to parents and educationists to allow us, deaf people to use varied communication skills in our interactions. Please bear with us. We want to learn and we are intelligent too but the used mode of communicating withdraws our learning strengths, thus we miss out.

The experiences shared by people who are deaf or hard of hearing born to hearing parents sound painful and very emotional, but that is how the respondents felt. This is further explained by one interviewee who said, *Speech reading from one course to the other is very confusing and strenuous too. One needs to keep following speaker’s movements to make sure that he or she does not miss the speaker’s face in order to speechread what the speaker is saying.* The findings emphasise that all people dealing with issues of people who are deaf or hard of hearing should not restrict their communication to speechreading skills but treat every person who is deaf as a unique individual. It highlights that people who are deaf or hard of hearing prefer alternated means of communication. It gives people who are deaf or hard of hearing born to hearing parents the right to interact and learn in their first language, which is Sign Language.

Identity confusion and isolation

One interviewee pointed out, ‘...while at secondary, my parents guarded my movements and I could not be-friend other children in the neighbourhoods’. The other interviewee echoed, *Unfortunately, I was the only deaf boy (as they labelled me) in my whole primary and secondary education. I felt lonely and lost*. Another interviewee in support to all this said:

Peers and even teachers had a tendency of giving back exercises books by calling out names while moving about. It meant calling my name many times before some good Samaritan alerted me about it. Classmates always made fun of it and that always reminded me that I was different from them. It hurted me so much but there was nothing I could do about it.

These feelings are further expanded by one interviewee, ‘*It was only when I went for advanced training that I met other people who were deaf and started to learn Sign Language in order to at least belong to deaf peers. At first meetings, the people who are deaf did not readily accept me.*’ Another participant who was hard of hearing reported, ‘*While in institutions of hearing people I had showers of labels. I went through a lot of confusion before deaf peers welcomed me. I felt isolated throughout my primary and secondary education. I am now happy and enjoy signing to my peers and sharing jokes.*’ All these reflections reveal that through ignorance most hearing parents, peers and educationists create very miserable situations and identity crisis for children who are deaf by forcing them to speechread only and blocking them from socialising with deaf peers. The findings revealed teachers, hearing schoolmates and siblings also added confusion and isolation to the already affected person who was deaf or hard of hearing and born to hearing parents.

DISCUSSIONS

This section discusses the research questions and rising assumptions from the findings and related literature reviews.

How does a person who is deaf and/or hard of hearing acquire speechreading skills?

The study reveals that people who are deaf or hard of hearing who come from hearing families go through very hard experiences. From the excerpts one can deduce that nobody trained people who were deaf or hard of hearing born to hearing parents to speechread. The children who were deaf or hard of hearing had themselves to craft own survival speechreading skills in order to remain connected to their hearing families. They taught themselves to
speechread and connect ideas or words to objects and events in their environments. They however received corrections and demonstrations here and there that boosted their encouragement and desires to want to learn more. They learnt to keep their focus on the speaker in order to get spoken messages. Agreeably, Braswell-Burris (2010) and Mitchell and Karchmer (2004) posit that 10% of children who are deaf are born to deaf parents; therefore 90% of children who are deaf or hard of hearing are born to hearing parents. Based on the aforementioned, it is highly probable that a deaf child’s first exposure to language is not his or her natural or visual language, which is Sign Language, but rather a fragmented model of the spoken language of the hearing parents. Thus, this is the beginning of the cycle that perpetuated language difficulties for children with hearing loss born to hearing parents. Being under the custodian of parents be they hearing or deaf, the child who is deaf or hard of hearing may not have the power to refute anything said by his or her parents, thus ends up learning speechreading only to interpret the spoken language.

This study guided then, by the bilingual deaf education framework encourages it’s readers to respect the natural language of people who are deaf or hard of hearing and their culture. That is, people who are deaf or hard of hearing should learn their first language which should in turn assist them acquire skills of the second language.

What are the speechreading experiences of people who are deaf and hard of hearing?

The hard of hearing that depended on speechreading expressed, we are the most disadvantaged because people take it for granted that all hard of hearing people can speechread and understand every spoken language. Here a person with post-lingual deafness, that is, who became deaf after acquiring language, is likely to benefit because of previously discussed reasons. Hence, it should still be taken note of that, not all people who are hard of hearing or deaf hear the same or speechread in the same manner, as already alluded, … each person is an individual though we are described as deaf or hard of hearing. One participant who was deaf narrated her experiences:

My parents did not know about Sign Language. I also did not know that there was a language called Sign Language. My parents and siblings spoke to me and asked me to articulate. I had difficulties in producing voice which they wanted me to do. I found myself depending on speechreading for all my communication with them. I was sent at a school for the hearing where I was the only girl who was deaf. Nobody could sign in the school and I used speechreading only to interpret what I was taught. I did not learn anything and always failed all subjects. Through the school head’s advice I was transferred to a school of the Deaf, I was surprised that Sign Language was a language. Although I did not drop speechreading but here I resorted to Sign Language in most of my interactions. My Sign Language became rich since it was supported by speechreading. I later passed with high passes all the previously failed subjects.

The experiences of people who are deaf or hard of hearing express high ill-consideration to Deaf Culture. Hence the conceptual framework of this study, which is the bilingual deaf education framework, guides us to respect other people’s cultures and first languages as we would like done to ours. Lived experiences of people who are deaf and hard of hearing in this study, are asking hearing parents, educationists, peers and siblings; What we are doing by forcing people who are deaf to interpret the spoken language through speechreading only?

What challenges do people who are deaf and hard of hearing face in speechreading?

The study revealed that, both people who are deaf or the hard of hearing had varied experiences in applying the speechreading skill to interpret the spoken language. Most of the participants found it difficult to learn using speechreading only. Both, people who are deaf and the hard of hearing opted for alternated and varied communication skills with their families and in their educational endeavours besides speechreading. The majority of participants defined speechreading as an unfriendly skill to interpret a new topic or concept. This was evidenced by the literature example on how the word buried was misread for married. The interpretation difficulties on a similar topic varied from one person to the other, fulfilling how people who are deaf or hard of hearing differed from each other in their speechreading skills.

Whole day assimilation of information through speechreading was described as tiresome and boring. It also has a lot of bearing on concentration span, distortions and misconceptions. Catching up after some concentration lapses was very difficult for a person who depended on speechreading. Conversations with people who are deaf revealed that those who could use both Shona/Ndebele and English experienced challenges in speechreading like any other person who was deaf even though the degree of the challenges differed from one person to the other. The researcher observed that most post-lingual deaf people were better in speechreading both in the first language (L1) and the second language (L2) on topics they had prior knowledge. It assumes people with post-lingual deafness to possibly have heard and/or spoken the word before they became deaf. Thus, depending on age of onset and type of
hearing loss, some of them may be at an advantage over others due to prior Shona and English knowledge and meaning of most words or vocabulary used in a particular situation. The situation is likely to be very difficult for a person with pre-lingual deafness, especially, to speech read Shona or Ndebele conversations if used to speechreading English conversations only. For example, there are no voiceless sounds in Shona or Ndebele. On the other hand, all Shona and Ndebele sounds are attached to vowels and are voiced too, for instance in Shona ‘sa se si so su’ are voiced while in English the ‘s’ sound is not attached to vowels and is unvoiced. This is likely to confuse people who are deaf who should interpret Shona or Ndebele conversations and English. Another participant complained, *I cannot spend the whole day watching your mouth, face and body; I also get tired just like you, when you talk all day without a break.* The study therefore, cautions us to put more care in our communications with people who are deaf or hard of hearing. It reminds us not to always take it for granted that since our interactions were face-to-face, so the person who is deaf or hard of hearing understood us. There is need to always cross-check whether the message was understood or not.

**What mechanisms ought to be put in place to manage speechreading?**

Communication binds children to their parents and to society. In other words, communication also breeds communication as already alluded. Speechreaders should also be prepared to admit when they have not understood, rather than pretend to have decoded the message. Supporters of bilingual deaf education believe that early comprehensible access to the first language, gives way to learning the second language without much difficulties. Agreeably, Braswell-Burris (2010); Paul and Quigley (1990) and Cummins (1984) suggested that in order for a second language to be acquired, a child’s first language must be intact. Paul and Quigley (1990) and Vygotsky (1978) assert that through bilingualism the child can view phenomena under more general categories and linguistic operations.

Most authorities agree that successful speech-readers are those who are able to take limited information on the face, described as 30% by most literature and fill the 70% gaps using other information present in the situations, such as, body language, facial expression, context, and extra. The study still notes with concern that they may not be able to completely fill the 70% gaps. Whatever percentage that may be left un-interpreted leaves a lot to be desired because distortions or misunderstandings have chances of evoking chaos in people’s lives. The speech-reader sees part of the message, puts it together and makes sense of it. Speech-readers need to be visually alert and visually attentive; therefore it is important that the vision of the person be enhanced by good lighting in the room where the communication is taking place. To manage to interpret some parts of a conversation a speech-reader needs to be aware of the content and at the same time visually aware of what is going on around him or her. Although guessing should minimally be applied, asking questions should help to understand or correct misunderstood speechreadings; this can even give you some control over what is being said. The speech-reader should be prepared to guess. However, one should be prepared to admit missed messages for further clarifications.

To be proficient in speechreading skills one needs training but the study does not reveal any trainings on it. The study also encourages hearing parents to expose the children who are deaf or hard of hearing to Deaf role models and peers. This is likely to help them develop pride and identity in being Deaf and appreciate their first language, which is Sign Language (Enns, 2006; Evans et al., 1994). The study further sees speechreading as a supplementary skill which aids communication.

**Lessons learnt**

The study revealed that people who rely on speechreading only can discern an average of 30% of what is said. The study asks what the hearing world is doing by restricting people who are deaf and hard of hearing to speechreading only. This skill may never make a person who is deaf or hard of hearing ‘hear’. The experiences reveal that it traumatises people who are deaf or hard of hearing and it makes them experiences failure in all their educational endeavours. Guided by the bilingual deaf education framework, the study asks the hearing world two questions from which it can learn some lessons; 1) By restricting people who are deaf or hard of hearing to speechreading only, we are somehow asking them to attempt to function as hearing people. By so doing, are we not trying to sacrifice the integrity of people who are deaf or hard of hearing?

2) If deafness is a culture aren’t we revealed experiences in this study acculturating people who are deaf or hard of hearing? This sounds automatic enculturation of people who are deaf or hard of hearing by hearing parents, educationists, siblings and peers. If we want people who are deaf or hard of hearing in Zimbabwe to be achievers and attain a better future, we should then, go by the bilingual deaf education framework as enunciated by Braswell-Burris (2010), a child’s first language must be intact and act as a gateway to learn the second language. The framework therefore emphasises that while in support of bilingualism, respect for one’s first language should be the *starter* to learning other languages. The study encourages Zimbabwean parents, educationists and siblings who may
already be bilingual, that is their first language plus English to be tri- or multi-lingual by learning the first language of people whom are deaf or hard of hearing in addition to languages they can fluently speak. On the other hand, people who are deaf or hard of hearing are also encouraged to be bilingual, that is, their first language, which is Sign Language plus English. Bilingualism is the way to go in deaf education as enunciated by Berke (2010) and many other authors.

All revealed experiences and challenges seem to reveal a lack of an inclusive linguistics policy in Zimbabwe. Most probably if there was one, the shared lived experiences and reflections in this study should have had a different tone to the ones expressed. However, as noted earlier, some specific modes of communication are grounded or driven by the philosophy and meta-theory that one subscribes to. Thus, in this study the use and benefits of speechreading and Sign Language as separate or complementary entities to persons who are deaf remain strong, recognised and useful for people who are deaf to communicate with others and learn. The study also revealed a high need for parental training in deaf education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings it is recommended that:

- there should be mandates that guide both parents and educationists on communication needs of people who are deaf or hard of hearing.
- an inclusive linguistics policy be developed by the government.
- a policy should be developed by the government on bilingual deaf education for hearing parents and their children who are deaf or hard of hearing as an early intervention strategy.
- bilingual deaf education should cascade to schools and tertiary institutions of the hearing.
- hearing parents with children who are deaf or hard of hearing should undergo communication trainings with their children.
- the government develops a policy on teaching Sign Language to siblings of a child who is deaf.
- at risk registers be developed to help follow up on children born deaf or suspected to develop progressiveness deafness with a view to check on their communication patterns with their families or schools by both, the Ministry of Education and Health.

CONCLUSIONS

It encompasses lipreading plus other clues. The study, therefore conclusively suggests that speechreading is a technique of understanding the spoken language through visual interpretations such as; the movements of the lips, face, tongue, jaws of the speaker and the person who is deaf’s available contextual knowledge of the subject or concept. It is a face-to-face interaction concept in linguistics and communication. In other words it is a mode of conveying and retrieving information through direct interaction between the sender and the receiver. Speechreading is also a skill that is used by hearing people to complement communication in their day-to-day face-to-face interactions. The study cautions its readers to be aware that, the innate ability to speechread varies from person to person. Speechreading enhances communication in noisy situations--such as a noisy airplane, subways, rock concerts, under a hair dryer--when a message cannot be understood without seeing the speaker's face. There is more to this study than just speechreading experiences. Many more grey areas that need probing and understanding were revealed. The study creates more ground to explore deeper the language learning experience of people who are deaf who are brought up by hearing parents or guardians.

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