

Improving the Amharic Sign Language (Signing and Interpreting Skills) of Special Needs and Inclusive Education Apprentices in Higher Education Institutions in Ethiopia: Debre Tabor University in Focus

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Abstract

The main objective of this action research was to improve the Amharic sign language, signing and interpreting skills, of second year special needs and inclusive education regular students in Debre Tabor University. The study rummage-sale a descriptive survey design that embroils qualitative methods. Interview and classroom observation were used to gather the necessary data for the study; the data were analyzed and reported thematically. Seven students were used as the subject of the study; and they were purposely chosen, i.e. purposive sampling was employed. We exhilarated the learners to participate so that they could understand the meaning of the pictures/figures which was showed – this was effective. The researchers believed that evolving students' participation was very significant for effective sign language learning; professors could play an important role to attain educational objectives.

Keywords: Sign language, Signing, Interpreter, Amharic, Improvement

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1. Introduction

Teaching-learning process requires adequate communication to transfer the lesson information from the teacher to the students. Therefore, implementing successful communication method in schools enhance students understanding of the learning objectives. In inclusive schools, there are different types of communication methods still used. In inclusive education, adequate communication and educational support would benefit those who are deaf and hard of hearing students (Wang, 2015).

In Ethiopia, the movement towards inclusive education continues on the assumption that teachers are willing to admit students within the regular classes and be responsible for meeting their needs (Tirussew, 1999). As a result some schools in Ethiopia started implementing inclusion approach for deaf students and the school started hiring interpreters to deliver information for those who admitted students because the education system started to integrate deaf students in inclusive classroom. In inclusive school, sign language is used as the main communication method for deaf children. Most deaf students who admitted in inclusive schools use sign language to communicate with their teachers and students.

According to (Greaves, 1991), sign language interpreter should be highly skilled and educated. It is also preferable if he/she is highly skilled in listening to speech and repeats it back to the deaf or hard of hearing person.

Sign language in Ethiopia used likely Amharic sign language. We can say that sign language in Ethiopia is not developed well and yet used by the deaf community and their supporters. In addition, Ethiopian sign language has other country sign language code switching and pidgins. There is a problem of getting qualified sign language interpreters who are familiar with the ethics and conduct of behavior in sign language interpreting during the learning and teaching process (Eyasu, 2013).

Implementing standardized sign language interpretation is the concerned practices in creating and sustaining quality education. Interpreters working in schools and other higher institutions face some challenges which go unnoticed due to limited knowledge of sign language interpreting practice. In addition, there might be limited awareness of sign language interpreting practice in the schools.

Pawlos (2011) stated that the contribution of the government in expanding sign language interpretation in Ethiopia is very limited. Many students who are deaf and hard of hearing may attend regular classrooms without sign language trained teachers or skilled sign language interpreters.

Alemayehu (2000) also stated that many deaf students in Ethiopia often conflict with their teachers for their lack of communication skills in sign language. They believe that their low academic achievements resulted from

their teacher's poor competence in communication and lack of commitment in teaching. These might have a cause of low participation of deaf students in their learning activities, inhibiting their curiosity in education.

Some effects of sign language interpreters practice challenges are not investigated, and attention is not given their profession by Ethiopian educational offices. Sign language interpretation services have not developed yet. And the profession does not get enough attention in deaf education. This is because of some reasons such as less consideration for the Ethiopian sign language, availability of deaf students in hearing school, the less number of trained human resources in the field of deaf education and interpreters (Abay, 2011).

In higher institutions, students have a limited awareness about how to interpret and sign Amharic sign language for their peers and their teacher's for correct information. Special needs and inclusive education second year regular students have very low performance in Amharic sign language; they look as if like beginner of new language.

And so, understanding the problem of signing and interpreting skills of Amharic sign language, the researchers are initiated to conduct an action research on improving the Amharic sign language of second year special needs and inclusive education regular students in Debre Tabor University.

2. Research Questions

The study attempted to answer the following leading questions.

- ✚ How do we improve signing and interpreting skills of Amharic sign language in the selected classroom?
- ✚ What should be done to improve the quality of signing and interpreting skills in the selected class?

3. Objectives of the Study

The objective of this action research is to improve the Amharic sign language, signing and interpreting skills, of second year special needs and inclusive education regular students in Debre Tabor University.

4. Significances of the Study

The study provides better understanding and creates awareness on problems of practicing Amharic sign language, signing and interpreting skills, for the selected classroom. It helps or shows students to learn the Amharic sign language easily, and it's helpful to promote their signing and interpreting skills.

5. Materials and Method

This is a descriptive study. Qualitative approach was employed because it can allow in-depth information concerning the issue (Creswell, 2007). Hence, qualitative data were collected, analyzed and interpreted in the study.

Since this study is set forth to improve the Amharic sign language, signing and interpreting skills, of second year special needs and inclusive education students, the students were key participants of the study in the 2018/2019 academic year.

Taking the nature, scope and purpose of the research into careful consideration, purposive sampling technique was employed to select the target population in the study. Students' participants were selected as samples using purposive sampling. This means that seven second year special needs and inclusive education regular students took part in the study. Therefore, among 19 students, seven students were chosen purposely as the key participants of the study. These participants were selected because of their low achievement.

In gathering the required data for the study, classroom observation and interview were employed. The instruments were selected because of their suitability for gathering important data for the study.

Interview was employed as instruments of data collection in the study for it allows generating enough details when used in association with other instruments. In this kind of study which mainly draws on qualitative information interview is used as effective means of collecting rich data used to understand subtle meanings in the phenomena under focus (Nunan, 1992). All participants, seven students, were interviewed.

Observation was one of the methods of data collection tool used in this study. This was done using a structured observation checklist. The observation checklist incorporated items which were all concerned with signing and interpreting skills presentations at different times; classroom observation was made five times.

The researchers had to look for a convenient time for the data collection; the data collection sessions were arranged according to the times suggested by the researchers and the willingness of the participants. The data were collected at different phases. First, interview was made. This was followed by classroom observation.

The collected data were interpreted and discussed accordingly. The qualitative data obtained through classroom observation and interview were analyzed thematically.

6. Interview with the Learners

The investigators prepared five interview questions; the contents of the interview questions were about the challenges of signing and interpreting skills, Amharic sign language, availability of teaching resources/aids and

the ways to improve the signing and interpreting skills.

For the question asked to know the encounters students faced when they communicate via sign language, almost all learners responded that they had no any experience on the Amharic sign language, signing and interpreting skills. Amharic language is not their first language; and this had an undesirable effect on their signing and interpreting skills. Both signing and interpreting skills were difficult for the learners because the skills were new for them. For these reasons, they became slow learners and they did not enjoy the learning.

As regards to the appropriateness of the teaching-learning environment, all the respondents said that they felt free and happy, but it was difficult to communicate with their groups or peers. Some of their classmates laughed at them because of their Amharic pronunciation.

Concerning the availability of teaching resources/aids for the Amharic sign language, the students responded that the teaching resources were provided such as sign language dictionary, and we occasionally saw videos of different sign languages.

Lastly, students were asked what should be done in order to improve their signing and interpreting skills. All of them replied that they can improve their signing and interpreting skills through frequent practices with their peers and course instructors. And they need tutorial classes. In addition, since the medium of instruction of sign language is Amharic language, students should be familiar on the Amharic language.

7. Classroom Observations Result

As it was observed, in the first two observations, the students' participation were very low. But, in the rest three observations, the students' tried to participate actively when the lessons were delivered on the signing and interpreting skills (Amharic sign language). This showed that there was increment in the students signing and interpreting skills.

As far as classroom observation is concerned, teaching resources/aids were accessible in the Amharic sign language classroom such as sign language dictionary, videos, visual aids, and etc. However, they are not enough; more teaching resources/aids are needed for the betterment of the learners.

The classroom observation also showed that, there was a good rapport between the instructor and the students. And there was a good relationship among the students. The students were joyful with their instructor and the instructor too. They had a good relationship with their classmates, and they help each other. All students were interested in learning the Amharic sign language, signing and interpreting skills, except a student.

8. Actions taken

We began our action in the week beginning March 21. We encouraged the learners to participate so that they could understand the meaning of the pictures/figures which was showed. This action worked for seven of the nineteen learners whose participation were very low during the lesson presentation, Amharic sign language.

It's realized that some of the learners liked to be praised, especially, if they have participated because after they were praised, there was a change on their faces. They got changed by showing smiles and happiness on their faces. If a learner was quiet in the class, after praising him/her by saying "Thank you very much, keep it up, do it tomorrow" they would start talking. Or raising their hands and asking questions. This means that the learner's participation improved. And this indicated that the action really worked.

It's appreciated that most learners like gifts if they have done something very good in the classroom. Presents were bought and given for the learners who were able to contribute more in the lesson. The action worked for all seven of the learners. They were interested raising their hands in order to give ideas/revise the lesson. The learners were very excited to receive gifts, and they demanded to continue with the lesson. From that day the learners' participation, and how they behave in the classroom seemed to improve very much. They were very anxious to learn.

Teaching aids, especially visual aids, were used in the lessons in order to help the students to understand the content very easily. Many activities were done by using teaching aids. The activities were ended by considering the signing and interpreting skills of the students. The learners were asked to sign and interpret words which were attached to their daily activity. And all learners were successful, except a student. This was very successful lesson because almost everyone was able to participate and contribute.

Tutorial classes were given frequently concerning on the Amharic sign language, signing and interpreting skills. All learners attended the tutorial class, and there was a wide-ranging change on the signing and interpreting skills of the learners. Furthermore, peer-teaching was applied during the lesson. Students who are better in Amharic sign language were asked to teach/give tutor/ to the low achievers. And this was very successful.

9. Evaluation and Reflection of the Action

Two methods were used in evaluating our work, i.e. an evaluation table and drafted observation sheets. On the evaluation table, the learners' results were kept, and on the observation sheets, a tick mark was put each to

indicate that whether the learners were capable or not capable to participate in sign language lessons.

The reason for these two processes were that we wanted to see the difference before and after the actions. The learners' marks were recorded from the time we started working with them, on every task that they did. The evaluation table was helping us to know how successful the work was.

Finally, a few special needs and inclusive education instructors were invited to observe the actual teaching in the classroom, and they told us that the teaching-learning process was enjoyable. And almost all students improved their signing and interpreting skills, except a student. In addition to this, they gave necessary feedbacks that helped us to redirect our research and devoted more actions to have eternal solution for the problem.

10. Recommendation

It's believed that from the action research project, we learned many things. Some are the following;

- ✚ Developing students' participation was very important for effective sign language learning.
- ✚ How to solve problems with myself and tend together with my students.
- ✚ Teachers could play an important role to achieve educational objectives.
- ✚ Action research is the basic tool to evaluate the strength and weakness of teaching-learning process.
- ✚ Action research required collaborative work to solve the existing problem.

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