

Practices in the Administration and Management of Examinations for Learners with Hearing Impairment in Zambia

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Abstract

The study investigated the practices in the administration and management of examinations for grade 12 learners with hearing impairment in selected schools in Zambia. The study employed mixed methods research, in particular a sequential exploratory design. The sample was sixty (60) comprising teachers, headteachers, Education Standards Officers-Special Education, Education Standards Officers-Examinations, Education Standards Officers-General Inspection, Senior Education Standards Officers, special education, Principal Education Officers in charge of examinations, Examination Council of Zambia-special education and Headquarters Chief Examinations officer. Simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques were used to select the respondents. Data was collected using a semi-structured questionnaire and interview guide which was analysed descriptively and thematically. Findings revealed that examinations were administered in the mainstream in Standard English language and pupils had difficulties understanding questions in English grammar different from that in signed English hence repeatedly raised their hands in the examination room; asking for someone to interpret in sign language. Most learners complained that the examinations are not suitable for them as they are neither in sign language nor signed English. Instructions during the examinations in most centers were given in English language, devoid of sign language interpreters to help, causing learners to repeat questions as answers in the answer booklet. The extra 30 minutes given to learners after the examination is not enough. Findings also revealed that marking is done by teachers specialized in particular subjects, who, mostly have limited knowledge in special education or signed English commonly used in written work among the hearing impaired; have challenges in reading and understanding the answers from the learners as they see signed English used as having too many grammatical errors. Markers see learners' written work as not making sense because of their use of signed English and as a result, most work did not attract a mark leading to a majority failing examinations. The study recommends that the Examination Council of Zambia (ECZ) should use adapted or modified or signed English in examination questions and increase use of objective tests and qualified specialist teachers for the hearing impaired (HI) to mark examinations and set test items.

Key words: *Hearing Impairment, Practices, Administration, Management, Examinations, Sign Language Interpreters*

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INTRODUCTION

Assessment focuses on the concept surrounding collection of data, interpreting, providing feedbacks, making of informed decisions on the outcomes and how to deal with observed weaknesses (Airsian & Russeull, 2008). The Examinations Council of Zambia (ECZ) is a corporate body established in 1983 by an Act of Parliament with a mandate of conducting summative examinations at different school levels for all learners without discrimination and based on the principle that evidence-based decision making is critical for improving the quality of Education for All (EFA) (MoE 1996; 20013). As a result, the ECZ has been examining all learners including those with Hearing Impairment (HI) at grades 7; 9 and 12 in various academic disciplines. Although ECZ has the mandate of assessing all learners, the performance in public examinations among learners with hearing impairment at all levels of education has been quite low (ECZ, 2014; Moonga 2014; Chikopela & Ndhlovu, 2016; 2017, Chifinda, 2017).

Hence, these concerns in the performance of learners with hearing impairments in public examinations among stakeholders have raised the need to investigate factors responsible for the low performance of learners with hearing impairment with the focus being on assessment practices at classroom level and at summative academic assessment at grade 12 level of education in Zambia.

Assessment is believed to be a purposeful process of determining learning progress and provision of remediation through feedback to given learners. The assessment as a process therefore requires the use of multiple approaches in the generation of data for the purpose of decision-making in relation to learners acquired skills, knowledge or attitudes. Conclusions about the quality of students' learning are not drawn from a single practice but a multiple of approaches in establishing the extent for learning that have taken place over a period of time.

The process of taking a test which requires writing by deaf students in itself becomes the most complex and difficult task for all students with hearing loss. Students with hearing loss have challenges with writing English because they have difficulties accessing and learning English syntactical and morphological structures (Chu, & Flores, 2011). Because of limitations in either auditory or visually, learners make numerous errors at the sentence level, (Martin 2012; Mulambia, Mpolomoka, Chitondo & Muyendekwa, 2023; Phiri, Kalasa & Chanda, 2023).

In addition, because many students with hearing loss have difficulty with reading, their exposure to models of good writing may be limited for them to face with confidence a summative examination. Teachers of the deaf often emphasize an approach to writing that focuses on producing basic sentences, which results in them writing uninformative, uninteresting and incoherent texts which in the long run negatively impact on quality writing (Ross, 2017; Sampa, Sitali, Mpolomoka, Lubungu, Kangwa, Nyirenda & Chitondo, 2022; Chanda, 2023).

According to Dana (2006), test questions become accessible to learners with hearing loss when they include insufficient context and reduced bulkiness in question stem, use double negative statements, use idiomatic expressions, use multiple meaning words, use embedded clauses, use inappropriate structure of questions and content. This is seen to be inappropriate to an ordinary learner but supports the experience of deaf test-takers and contributes to access to text item content (Mandyata & Kamukwamba, 2018). To learners with hearing impairment, such a test becomes a mere test of understanding English form, from the viewpoint of a deaf user of English who has had auditory input yet misses the intended test of the subject matter contained in the examination question papers. Such tests create a critical barrier, blocking access by the deaf learner to the test itself. This has necessitated the call for a more accommodative format of assessment for the deaf learners.

Assessment is very essential in determining the quality of education offered to learners with hearing impairment. Khoarai, (2013), expresses concern on test format in the assessment of learners with hearing impairments and to an extent to which content measures the knowledge and skill levels. Nature and quality of test items contribute to learners performing poorly on the test due to problems in accessing the content of the test. Mandyata & Kamukwamba (2018) suggests a reduction in structure of the format assessment tools such as a test, use of clean and printed materials and writing on a solid clean background, typed (not handwritten) materials in a familiar style, proper spacing and sequencing of items. To avoid separate answer sheets, students transfer responses, present questions in a structured, stable, predictable sequence (this helps students make the transition from item to item), providing adequate space to facilitate students' response to each item and have a reading level that is not too high for students. The picture projected by the study may not be quite attainable in ECZ efforts to assess learners with hearing impairment.

Ross, (2017) states that in some situations, students with deafness may receive poor marks on a test due to difficulty in following the test directions rather than lack of knowledge of the test content. Teachers can minimize this problem by using cues that help students understand and follow test directions. Cues include color coding, font variations, underlining, bolding, symbols and enlarging the print. Cues can highlight key parts of items and emphasize changes in specific items. The process of taking a test which requires writing by deaf students in itself becomes the most complex and difficult task for all students with hearing loss. When looked at critically, this problem comes way back from college, where teachers are trained. There is need to re-look what Banda, Phiri, Kaale, Banda, Mpolomoka, Chikopela & Mushibwe (2023) encourage in their discussion of the application of bloom's Taxonomy to scaffold the categorization of cognitive processes development in students. Students with hearing loss have challenges with writing English because they have difficulties accessing and learning English syntactical and morphological structures. Either auditory or visually, they make numerous errors at the sentence level (Martin 2012; Chikopela, et. al., 2019; Mpolomoka & Sakai, 2021; Lubungu, Moonga, Muyuni & Zimba, 2022). In addition, because many students with hearing loss have difficulty with reading, their exposure to models of good writing may be limited. Teachers of the deaf often emphasize an

approach to writing that focuses on producing basic sentences, which results in them writing uninformative, uninteresting and incoherent texts. Against the nature of the written deaf culture which depends on use of telegraphic language, the emphasis made by the study may not be appropriate in ECZ assessment of learners with hearing impairment.

Mitchell (2002) urges that assessment serves four many functions: classification and diagnostic classification, selection for educational placement and group assignment, specific treatment planning and evaluation of interventions. Therefore, assessment should have the ability to give dependable feedback that is both a valid and reliable account of pupils' learning and performance. It is argued that the negative consequences of public examinations for learners with hearing loss stems from the notion of barriers to assessment that encompass their education. Barriers to assessment encompass both external and internal factors that interfere with learner performance in examinations aid at school.

Okumbe and Tsheke (2012) observed that what is needed was to translate the curriculum into manageable entities that can be used in the classroom for instruction and for effective assessment. Curriculum and assessment are key areas in the provision of effective teaching and learning. The modification of a curriculum for learners with special educational needs just like for other learners, should have appropriate instruction and planned assessment. The recommendation made by Okumbe and Tsheke (2012) might be different from ECZ practices because there is no modified curriculum and therefore no planned assessment for learners with hearing impairment.

IDEA (2004) argued that assessment and evaluation of progress among children who are deaf or hard of hearing is a complex process. Challenges often go undetected by individuals unfamiliar with the hidden impact of hearing loss. Challenges to professions in the field of deaf education are particularly notable in the areas of information access, communication modalities, language selection and application of assessment tools, technology and access to highly qualified personnel. Scholars (Chikopela & Ndhlovu, 2017; Chikopela, et. al., 2017; Ross, 2017; Mahawish, 2012; Sikanyika et al., 2022; Mtonga & Mpolomoka, 2022; Scherer, 2024) urge that professionals evaluating the learners who are deaf or hard of hearing must be sufficiently knowledgeable in the field of hearing loss. Interpersonal communication skills are a necessary part of the data process as the examiner must be able to communicate well with all relevant information providers.

Effective administration and management of examinations is the expectation of any country in ensuring quality education. In Zambia however, the administration and management of examinations for the deaf/hard of hearing pupils has not been viewed as successful. There have been some instances of missing results and complaints of unfair marking of scripts by examiners. As a result, the performance of grade 9 pupils after examinations has been very low, a trend that continues to grade 12 and consequently yielding a high level of drop outs. This posed a concern to the researchers as the reason why this trend has continued remains unknown.

It is hoped that the findings of this study can help specialists, district and provincial examination officers and the Examination Council of Zambia come up with strategies to improve the management of examinations for the deaf/ hard of hearing hence help them perform better in their Grade 12 examinations.

The following were the objectives of the study:

1. Explore the practices employed in the administration and management of examinations for the deaf and hard of hearing grade twelve pupils.
2. Ascertain the implications of the practices in the management and administration of grade 12 examinations of the deaf and hard of hearing.

Conceptual Model

This study was influenced by the social model of disability. The social model of disability posits that the barriers that a person experiences to enjoy and participate in the life and activities of their community are not intrinsic to any medical or other condition or impairment but arise from disabling attitudes and environments (Abberley, 1987). The social model of disability sees the examination system as the problem and hindrance to deaf hard of hearing successful transition to another level of the education system.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed research method, in a sequential exploratory design. The total sample was sixty (60) comprising twenty (20) teachers, thirteen (13) headteachers, five (5) Education Standards Officers-Special Education (ESO-SP), five (5) Education Standards Officers-Examinations, five (5) Education Standards

Officers-General Inspection, five (5) Senior Education Standards Officers, special education, five (5) Principal Education Officers in charge of examinations, one (1) Examination Council of Zambia-special education officer and one (1) Headquarters Chief examinations officer.

Simple random sampling and expert purposive sampling techniques were used to select the respondents. Simple random sampling was employed in selecting teachers and headteachers. Expert purposive sampling was used to select the following: the Education Standards Officers in charge of Special Education (ESO-SP), the Education Standards Officers in charge of Examinations, the Education Standards Officers-General Inspection, the Senior Education Standards Officers in charge of special education, the Principal Education Officers-in-charge of examinations, the Examination Council of Zambia-special education officer and the Chief examinations officer at headquarters. These were selected purposively because they are experts in key positions and directly handling learners with special education needs, units and departments that also cater for learners with hearing impairment under study.

Data was collected using a semi-structured questionnaire and interview guide was analysed descriptively and thematically (Banda, et. al., 2017).

FINDINGS

Practices in the administration and management/processing of examination for deaf hard of hearing grade twelve pupils

Findings revealed that examinations were administered in the mainstream in Standard English language. All the 60 participants in the study indicated that standard English language was used to set examinations for learners with hearing impairment. A participant from ECZ said:

“Exams for pupils with hearing impairment are prepared the same way as the other Grade 12 pupils in the mainstream using English language.”

Similarly, one of the Education standard officers said: *“The exams for the HI Grade 12s are in English just like the ones for the regular pupils.”*

One interesting finding of the study relate to what one headteacher said that: *“Examinations are just the same way as for other pupils so called ‘normal’.”*

Results revealed that pupils with HI were given extra 30 minutes after the standard time for the examination. However, the extra 30 minutes after the examination is not enough for pupils to finish answering the questions.

Table 1: Language of communication during examinations

Language of communication	Frequency	%
English signed language	22	37
Total communication	8	13
English oral language	21	35
Sign language	4	7
Lip reading	2	3
Familiar language	2	3
Normal language	1	2
Total	60	100

The results in table 1 above shows that various modes of communication were used during examination of HI grade 12 pupils. Majority of participants indicated that they communicated using English signed language (37%), others mentioned English oral language (35%), total communication (13%), sign language (7%), lip reading (3%), familiar language (3%) and normal language (2%).

Relating to this finding, one teacher said that

“We use English signed language to communicate with pupils during examinations though we encounter communication breakdown to explain some concepts.”

Similarly, another teacher said that

“Am not so sure about the language used during examinations for the grade 12s who have hearing impairment but I feel English and familiar language is used.”

Comparatively, an Education Standards Officer-Special Education said that

“English and sign language are used when giving instructions during exams. This makes it easier for the pupils to understand and follow instructions without difficulties.”

Meanwhile, a Principal education Standards Officer also mentioned that normal language is mainly used and only instructions are given in sign language because there are terms which need signing for clarification

One interesting finding relates to what a special education teacher said that *“Lip reading is used because most teachers in my school are not that good in sign language.”* Yet, one headteacher posits that:

“Total communication is used by invigilators so that they cater for the deaf and hearing pupils. When pupils who are deaf fail to understand the instructions and questions they are just encouraged to read on their own and do what they can to answer the questions during examinations. It is a pity there is nothing much we can do if we fail to communicate in their language.”

Whereas, the Chief examination officer at Headquarters (HQ) indicated that most invigilators use sign language during examinations when communicating with G12 pupils with hearing impairment; the Special Education Standards Officer said that *“Invigilators make use of English oral language if they don't know sign language.”*

Implications of the practices in the administration and management of grade 12 examinations for deaf and hard of hearing

Difficulties in understanding questions

Participants in the study indicated that pupils have difficulties understanding questions during examinations. Out of the 60 respondents who participated in the study, 45 (75%) explained that it was difficult for pupils to understand questions written in English language because English grammar is different from signed English hence pupils repeatedly raise their hands in the examination room asking for someone to interpret in sign language.

A teacher said:

“Pupils appear confused when they see the paper, they always mumble and always put their hands up asking what is written in the paper.”

The headteacher said:

“During examinations pupils who are deaf do not seem to understand the English language in the paper. They always demand that teachers read for them in sign language. Not too long ago we even made a recommendation to ECZ to change the questioning techniques and use telegraphic language when setting examination questions.”

Complaints on how exams are set

Out of the 60 people that participated in the study, 48 (80%) revealed that most learners complain that the examinations are not suitable for them as they are neither in sign language nor signed English.

A majority 55 (91%) indicated that instructions during the examinations in most centers are given in English language, devoid of sign language interpreters to help. This has caused learners to repeat questions as answers in the answer booklet especially when there is no one conversant with sign language to correct them. A teacher said:

“When answering questions, the HI learners begin with the instructions written on the cover page and go all the way to writing the questions in the paper. When they are done, they submit and say they have finished writing the examination.”

Using Teachers in without sign language skills to mark exams

All the participants 60 (100%) revealed that marking is done by teachers specialized in particular subjects, who mostly have limited knowledge in special education or signed English commonly used in written work among the hearing impaired.

They also mentioned that they have challenges in reading and understanding the answers from the learners as they see signed English used as having too many grammatical errors.

A teacher said:

“The language of instruction (sign language/signed English) and the language of examination (English language) are different. This confuses pupils as they fail to interpret the questions.”

Another teacher said:

“Some learners opt not to write anything in the answer scripts because of language barrier. This has given a negative implication that HI learners are dull.”

In addition, results revealed that grade 12 examination markers see HI learners' written work as not making sense because of their use of signed English and as a result, most work did not attract a mark leading to a majority failing examinations. The Senior Education Standards Officer said: *“The language barrier of deaf children affects performance in national examinations because markers don't understand what they write.”*

DISCUSSION

Practices in the administration and management/processing of examination for deaf hard of hearing grade twelve pupils

Findings revealed that examinations were administered in the mainstream in Standard English language. In a related study by Moonga (2013), the author observes that most examination past papers for candidates with hearing impairment in all learning institutions such as schools, colleges and universities including Examinations Council of Zambia lack images to assist learners with hearing impairment for mental picture of what is being asked. For this reason, learners with hearing impairment lack understanding of the content of the exam papers because they are set in unfamiliar language which makes it difficult for them to attempt questions which do not depict how they communicate.

Results also revealed that pupils with HI were given extra 30 minutes after the standard time for the examination. However, the 30 minutes extra after the examination is not enough for pupils to finish answering the questions. This shows that despite the addition in examination time grade 12 pupils with hearing impairment fail to finish writing the examinations because most of the time they are still struggling to understand the questions which are set in a language they do not communicate in. Similarly, a study by Chifinda, (2017) revealed that the level of language in examination question papers phrased in ordinary English language proved to be too difficult for the learners with special educational needs, especially those with hearing impairment. The study further established that deaf learners take considerable time to comprehend and respond to questions appropriately during tests and examinations.

Furthermore, the results revealed that various modes of communication were used during examination of HI grade 12 pupils. This included English signed language which was commonly used, English oral language which was most preferred by invigilators that had no knowledge of sign language, total communication, sign language, lip reading, familiar language which comprised the local language of instruction and normal language which included the oral language and improvised signs to unfamiliar terms. On the contrary, Black, (2008) postulates that there is a variety of live captioning services available to support students with hearing and hard of hearing impairment in writing examinations based on the fact that people who are deaf or hard of hearing often use vision to receive information. A computer conveys written information to the deaf and hard of hearing so that they can communicate fully. In a quest to continue helping individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing write their examinations fairly, closed captions that have time-texts are displayed on video that includes both speech and essential non speech sounds or simply sign language. Often these aids make assessment of learners with hearing impairment easy. The results show evidence that lacking alternative means to write examinations in G12 such as computers with software to help with translating written language to sign language makes it challenging to attempt exams.

The study revealed that it is difficult for pupils to understand questions written in English language because English grammar is different from signed English; hence, pupils repeatedly raise their hands in the examination room asking for someone to interpret in sign language. The pupils appear confused when they see the paper, they always mumble and always put their hands up asking for interpretation of what is written in the paper. They always demand that teachers read for them in sign language, a situation which caused some schools to make a recommendation to ECZ to change the questioning techniques and use telegraphic language when setting examination questions. This finding implies that pupils in G12 are mostly frustrated when they are writing examinations due to communication barriers in the manner in which questions are set.

This study revealed that most learners complain that the examinations are not suitable for them as they are

neither in sign language nor signed English which they are conversant with. Instructions during the examinations in most centers are given in English language, devoid of sign language interpreters to help. This has caused learners to repeat questions as answers in the answer booklet especially when there is no one conversant with sign language to correct them. When answering questions, the HI learners begin with the instructions written on the cover page and go all the way to writing the questions in the paper. When they are done, they submit and say they have finished writing the exam meanwhile they have not answered the questions. In line with this finding, Dana (2006) reported that test questions become accessible to learners with hearing loss when they include insufficient context and reduced bulkiness in question stem, use double negative statements, use idiomatic expressions, use multiple meaning words, use embedded clauses, use inappropriate structure of questions and content. This is seen to be inappropriate to an ordinary learner but supports the experience of deaf test-takers and contributes to access to text item content. In addition, Mandyata & Kamukwamba (2018) also support the finding by showing that setting questions only in the English language is not helpful. To the learners with hearing impairment, such a test becomes a mere test of understanding English form, from the viewpoint of a deaf user of English who has had auditory input yet misses the intended test of the subject matter contained in the examination question papers. Such tests create a critical barrier, blocking access by the deaf learner to the test itself. Hence, calling for a more accommodative format of assessment for the deaf learners (Raji, Kumar & Biji, 2023).

Findings revealed that marking is done by teachers specialized in particular subjects, who mostly have limited knowledge in special education or signed English commonly used in written work among the hearing impaired. It was also mentioned that they have challenges in reading and understanding the answers from the learners as they see signed English used as having too many grammatical errors. For this reason, pupils get confused and fail to interpret the questions. They opt not to write anything in the answer scripts because of language barrier. This has given a negative implication that HI learners are dull meanwhile it is just a lack of understanding of what is contained in the paper.

Teachers also experience challenges in understanding the written work of HI learners. They observed that the language of instruction (sign language/signed English) and the language of examination (English language) is different. This confuses pupils as they interpret the questions. In addition, results revealed that grade 12 examination markers see HI learners' written work as not making sense because of their use of signed English and as a result, most work did not attract a mark leading to a majority failing examinations and being among the lowest performing candidates in national examinations. This is a clear indication that both G12 HI pupils and G12 examination markers do not understand each other when it comes to examinations. Mahawish (2012) and Ross (2017) supported this finding by urging that professionals evaluating the learners who are deaf or hard of hearing must be sufficiently knowledgeable in the field of hearing loss. Interpersonal communication skills are a necessary part of the data process as the examiner must be able to communicate well with all relevant information providers.

CONCLUSION

The findings showed that examinations for grade 12 learners with hearing impairment are administered in the English language just the same way as it was done in most of the subjects written by G12 hearing pupils. This brought about difficulties in communication as the HI pupils were mostly conversant with signed English language but not the English grammar which they fail to comprehend and end up writing wrong answers or nothing at all. Markers for the G12 HI are specialized in particular subjects and not sign language hence when they come across the answer script of HI pupils, they fail to make sense out of it as it has too many grammatical errors and end up failing the pupils who have been examined in unfamiliar language. This trend has led pupils to continue performing poorly in the G12 examination.

The study recommends that the Examination Council of Zambia (ECZ) should use more adapted or modified or signed English in examination questions; increase use of objective questions in examination papers; use graphical illustrations in the question papers for easy understanding; School administrators should use sign language interpreters during invigilation; ECZ should use qualified specialist teachers for the hearing impaired (HI) to set examinations and mark; the Directorate of Standards at the Ministry Headquarters and the Examination Council of Zambia should allocate examination centers to schools with HI learners; ECZ should prepare parallel examinations specifically for the HI; ECZ should revise Policy and guidelines on HI examinations; school administrators should use varying assessment work instead of just relying on examinations; schools and the MoE should hold CPDs on HI examinations to sensitize and empower teachers; ECZ should introduce practical subjects/use of signed English.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

RC drafted the work, DL, RCM and GMS participated in the acquisition, analysis and interpretation of data for the article. Meanwhile, JM revised it critically for important intellectual content. All authors provided approval for publication of the content. They agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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Ethics Statement

This study was approved by Chalimbana University Research and Ethics Committee (CUREC). The participants provided written informed consent to participate in this study.

Data Availability Statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation. Further inquiries can be made to the corresponding author.

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