

## The Level of Sign Language Skill for Parents of Hearing Impaired Children

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**Abstract:** Parents who are unable to communicate in sign language with their children with hearing disabilities often feel frustrated, angry and dissatisfied when they are unable to express feelings and understand other people's conversations. This study was conducted to identify the level of communication skills of parents using sign language with children with hearing disabilities. Wilbur Schramm's Theory of Communication and Epstein's Parent Involvement Model were used in this study. The sample for this study consisted of respondents of a study representing the parent population of students with hearing disabilities at two Special Education National Schools in Kuala Lumpur of fifty people. Questionnaire instruments were used in this study to obtain quantitative data. Data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) and Ms Excel. Descriptive analyzes involving frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation were used. The results showed that the parents' language proficiency level was moderate. Various efforts are required for parents to improve their level of sign language skills in order to better interact with their children's future.

**Keywords:** parents, sign language, hearing disabilities, communication

### INTRODUCTION

The World Federation of Deaf people estimates that 70 million people practice sign language (Huenerfauth & Kacorri, 2015). In Malaysia, sign language is also synonymous with the deaf or those with hearing loss (HL). Individuals with hearing problems are unable to communicate verbally, instead they use sign language (Abdullah 2014). The HL community uses sign language as one of the ways for them to communicate in everyday life (Abdullah Yusuf, 2014; Low, 2015). The first language they form to communicate with each other is sign language (Malaysian Sign Language, 2007). Sign language is an information transmitted through hand movements, lip movement readings and body language. The 'Kamus Dewan' describes gestures as head movements, eye contact, handshaking and so on (Kamus Dewan, 2010).

Children of HL often face problems in communication due to various factors. Difficulties in communicating with HL children make it difficult for parents to accept (Azleen, 2013). There are also parents who are unable to use sign language to communicate with their children. Children of HL need someone to translate situation-based information into sign language codes for comprehension (Mohd Rosman, 2012). Communication disruption is caused by lack of

interaction using sign language (Rose & Conama, 2018). The importance of expressing ideas is essential to maintain positive communication in the family (Todd, 2013). Nancy (2016); Mohd Rosman (2012) stated the opposite because children of HL often feel frustrated, angry and dissatisfied when they are unable to express and let out their feelings. Nancy (2016) also stated that the communication gap between parent and HL child is one of the problems encountered because something were not properly explained.

Low (2015) explains that HL children show negative impacts, resulting from poor communication on cognitive, intellectual, emotional, social and behavioral development. According to McCullough and Duchesneau (2016), parental neglect causes HL children to suffer from psychological problems. Children of HL also face

academic difficulties due to the poor mastery of sign language that was caused by lack of parental awareness in Satiah learning (2009). Parental support and guidance are always needed by HL children in their daily activities including the need to communicate. Parents should also spend time with their children for activities such as reading or talking. Such activities will give a positive impact on HL children's development (Abidah 2014; Nancy 2016; Paezah and Faridah 2012). Ali, Norida and Siti (2017) also state that children's physical, social, emotional and intellectual development is influenced by parental interaction.

Communication using sign language with appropriate approach is important for HL children. Parents are the closest individuals to interact with the child (Siti Hasnah, 2013). Therefore, parents need to master the sign language so that meaningful information can be passed on to the HL children. The purpose of this study was to identify the level of parents' communication skills using sign language with HL children.

A process that involves communicating and receiving information between individuals is called communication (Ahmad 2012; Raya 2013). Communication includes the delivery of information, the reception of information, the expression of feelings, instructions and tasks (Abdullah, 2014). Koptseva, Liia & Kirko (2015) define communication as an interaction aimed at conveying information through signs or symbols. Communication can be concluded as an interaction process involving the transmission and reception of information.

Arzulyna's (2013) study on the effects of deafness on children's development from parents, teachers and audiologist's perception. Based on the interviews conducted, HL children encountered problems in language acquisition and mastery. The delay factor for children diagnosed with HL is also a barrier to language acquisition and mastery. Parents admit that they have difficulty communicating in sign language. HL children often do not have enough information due to communication constraints, Low (2015); Mohd Rosman (2012). Besides communication difficulties, HL children are also unable to focus when interacting because they do not understand their parent's sign language (Lieberman, Hatrak & Mayberry, 2014). Based on the description above, it is proven that it is important for parents to learn sign language to communicate with HL children.

It takes parents a long and difficult time to master the sign language to interact with their children (Henner, Caldwell-Harris & Hoffmeister, 2016; Knoors and Marschark, 2012). However, only a small number of parents are learning sign language to help their children learn. Snoddon (2015) stated that parents face difficulty in learning sign language is because it is their second language. HL children does not only find it difficult to interact with parents but it is also difficult to interact with people around them who do not know sign language. Norizan (2017) also stated that HL children are unable to interact with the community due to the limited use of sign language. In addition, the environment can also affect HL children's learning and mastery of sign language (Lederberg, Schick & Spencer, 2013).

This study is based on Wilbur Schramm's theory of communication. Koptseva et al., (2015) defined this theory as a process of information exchange involving interactions between individuals. This theory of communication emphasizes the two-way process between informers and the reception of information (Nuryanto, 2011). Providers and recipients of information must encode, translate and decode the information received (Nuryanto 2011; Natashadora 2013). The elements in this theory of communication have similarities to elements in sign language that is, interacting using sign language that include hand and face movements. The sign language code will be interpreted so that the speaker can receive information to complete the communication process.

Besides Wilbur Schramm's communication theory, parent involvement model that was Epstein's model of was also used as guidance. This model explains the involvement of parents with the school in order to give positive impact to HL children (Nancy, 2016). Epstein's model can serve as a guide, and benefit children from the collaboration between parents and the school (Price, 2011). There are six types of involvement in this model: parenting, communication, volunteering, home learning, decision making and community collaboration (Epstein, Sanders, Salinas, Jansorn and Voorhis, 2002). Involvement between parents, HL children and the school include support for learning, home guidance, academic performance discussions, bilateral communication, voluntary cooperation and mutual decision-making for school activities or programs. Irma (2018) describes the success of improving children's learning is a result from of the role of committed parents.

## **METHOD**

This study is a quantitative study using questionnaires as instruments. The instrument for this study was a two-part questionnaire, section A and section B. Section A was respondent's demographic with 11 items consisting of parental background. Information such as gender, age, race and home communication methods were collected for analysis using descriptive statistical analysis. Section B is an assessment of the parents sign language skills level with 10 items. Section B uses the 5-point Likert scale which are strongly disagree (1),

dissatisfaction (2), moderate (3), satisfied (4) and very satisfied (5). Section B was analyzed using descriptive statistics and Ms Excel software. Data is reported in table form. The sample for this study consisted of 50 parents from two National Schools of Special Education Hearing Impairment in Kuala Lumpur.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The data were analyzed using descriptive analysis through the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Software version 25.0 for section A and Ms Excel for section B.

### Finding(s)

#### Section A: Respondent's Background analysis

The Section A questionnaire consisted of 11 demographic items containing 50 respondents' information. The table below shows background analysis that is analyzed based on frequency and percentage from the questionnaire. The respondents' background can be referenced in table 1.

Table 1: Respondents' Background

No.	Information	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Gender		
	i. Male	23	46
	ii. Female	27	54
2.	Age		
	i. 21 - 30 years old	6	12
		22	44
	ii. 31 - 40 years old	22	44
	iii. 41 years old and above		
3.	Race		
	Malay	34	68
	Chinese	10	20
	Indian	6	12
4.	Occupation		
	Self-employed	21	42
	Private	15	30
	Government	14	28
5.	Academic qualifications		
	PMR/SPM	23	46
	Diploma / Degree	24	48
	Others	3	6
6.	Income		
	Under RM2000	20	40
	RM2000 - RM4000	15	30
	RM4000 - RM6000	10	20
	RM6000 and above	5	10

No.	Information	Frequency	Percentage
7.	Number of children	26	52
	1 - 2 children	19	38
	3 - 4 children	5	10
	5 - 6 children		
8.	Number of Children with Hearing Disabilities	46	92
	1 person	1	1
	2 persons	1	1
	3 people		
	4 people		
9.	Parents Hearing Status	48	96
	Normal Parents	2	4
	Parents with Hearing Disabilities		
10.	Communication Methods	12	24
	Speak	7	14
	Sign language	31	62
	Speak and Sign Language		
11.	Causes of Hearing Disability		
	During pregnancy	13	26
	At Birth	12	24
	After Birth	25	50

## Section B: Assessment of Parent's Sign Language Skills Level

Section B is an assessment of parents' sign language skill level consisting of 10 statements. This statement is to identify the level of parents' communication skills using sign language with HL children. Abu Halifah and Mohd Hanafi (2016); Jamil Ahmad (2002) stated that data interpretation is carried out to obtain mean values of high, moderate or low. A mean score of 3.67 to 5.00 indicates a high level of agreement with the statements provided in the questionnaire. The moderate level agreed with the statement showing mean scores of 2.34 to 3.66 while the high level was 3.67 to 5.00. The mean score table and data interpretation can be referenced in Table 2.

Table 2 Mean score and data interpretation

MEAN SCORE	DATA INTERPRETATION
1.00 – 2.33	Low
2.34 – 3.66	Moderate
3.67 – 5.00	High

The study found that parents could use basic sign language to communicate with their HL children. Parents can do the sign language and understand the child's sign language at a moderate level of 2.34 to 3.66. Parents can also correctly signal alphabets A to Z, numbers 0 to 10, child name codes, child's teacher name codes and child friend name codes. However, the findings of the item a3 found that parents can use the Manually Coded Malay, Malaysia Sign Language, American Sign Language (ASL) and Signing Exact English (SEE) at a low level of mean score 2.16. Overall, the findings indicate that the level of parent's sign language skills is moderate that is average of 3.02.

Table 3 Parent's Sign Language Skills Level

No.	Statement	Mean	Standard deviation	Level
a1.	Parent practices sign language well	2.76	0.92	Moderate
a2.	Parent can understand the child's sign language well	2.92	0.83	Moderate
a3.	Parent can give signal using correct sign language (KTBM/BIM/ASL/SEE)	2.16	0.98	Low
a4.	Parents can correctly do sign language of alphabet A to Z.	3.56	1.09	Moderate
a5.	Parents can correctly do sign language of numbers 0 to 10.	3.54	1.15	Moderate
a6.	The parent knows the sign language code of child's name	3.66	1.26	Moderate
a7.	Parents know the sign language code of the child's	2.64	1.06	Moderate

No.	Statement	Mean	Standard deviation	Level
	teachers			
a8.	The parent knows the sign language code of the child's friends	2.56	1.16	Moderate
a9.	Parents can give the child instructions using sign language	3.06	1.06	Moderate
a10	The child responds when the parent does sign language	3.38	0.92	Moderate
	Average min	3.02		

### Discussion(s)

The findings show that the overall level of parent's skills in sign language with HL children is moderate. Parents are important individuals for HL children to help them understand and learn about the environment through communication. Parents should be able to communicate using sign language at a high level so that information can be conveyed accurately. Mohd Rosman (2012) explains that HL children need parents to explain something by translating into comprehensible sign language codes.

Based on the questionnaire, items one and two, that was parent's ability and understanding of HL child sign language were moderate. Items nine and ten were also related to the parent's ability to use sign language to give instructions and responses received from HL children were also moderate. The moderate levels obtained indicate that the parents of the HL children are not yet fluent in sign language. The importance of interacting with HL children can impact their lives in the future. Parents and families who are able to communicate using sign language have a positive impact on HL children (Geers, Mitchell, Warner-Czyz, Wang, Eisenberg, & CDaCI Investigative Team, 2017). Kushalnagar, Mathur, Moreland, Napoli, Osterling, Padden, & Rathmann, (2010); Snoddon, (2015) explains that HL children who are able to communicate well have a quality and calm life.

Parent's ability to use Manually Coded Malay, Malaysia Sign Language, American Sign Language (ASL) and Signing Exact English (SEE) for item three were also at a moderate low level. Most parents and teachers are not proficient in sign language, but instead, they need to learn sign language based on grammar to communicate with HL children (Geers et al., 2017). This finding suggests that parents who are not yet proficient in sign language should strive to learn sign language to reach a high level rather than a moderate level. Parents' ability to do sign language of letters A to Z and numbers 0 through 10 are items four and five. The findings are also at a moderate level because of parents who are less aware of the importance of learning sign language for HL children. Siti Goodwill & Zetty (2018) found that some parents neglected their responsibilities and refused to learn sign language.

Findings of items six, seven, and eight show that parent's skills are moderate in relation to knowing the sign language code of child's name, teachers' names and friends' names. Parents should give priority to basic things like these instead of behaving half-heartedly. It is important for parents to know the names of their child's teachers or friends to ease the delivery of school-related information. The findings of the study also show instruction from the parents to the HL child and the reactions of the instructions is at a moderate level. The study of Shahida, Chua, Rosadah, Zalizan & Hamizatun (2012) found that parents face communication difficulties as

they do not master sign language to interact with HL children. Parents need to improve their proficiency in sign language skills by attending sign language classes. Snoddon (2015) states parents need to master sign language by taking sign language classes and engaging with the HL community.

It is important for parents to learn sign language to interact with their children despite the challenges of learning sign language compared to other languages (Napier, Leigh, & Nann, 2007). Wilbur Schramm's theory of communication emphasizes the exchange of information and two-way processes to complement the communication process. This theory of communication also focuses on information shared by senders and recipients (Koptseva et al., 2015). Parents need to translate the information received in the form of sign language codes to their children. The information that HL children receive is important in their lives as they understand what is happening in the environment. Napier et al (2007) emphasized that all family members should learn sign language as language at home so that HL children are not excluded from the conversation.

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Studies on the sign language skills of the parents of HL children gives an impact to the HL children, parents, teachers, Malaysia Ministry of Education (MOE) and Special Education Division. According to Spencer (2004); Zarina Abd Aziz (2019) weak language proficiency among HL children may be due to poor language proficiency. This study can serve as a guide to overcome the weakness of language mastery of HL children in academic and communication fields. The impact of this study is that parents can improve their sign language skills to a greater degree, indirectly can help their children improve vocabulary in language proficiency. Good language proficiency improves the academic performance of HL children at school. Sign language mastery can help HL children in their academic performance (Marschark, Shaver, Nagle, & Newman, 2015), but parents and teachers should strive to learn sign language to communicate effectively (Liong and Mohd Hanafi, 2019). In conclusion, mastery of sign language can have a positive impact on HL children.

The suggestion to increase the level of parent's sign language skills to communicate with HL children is that families need to understand and know the special needs of HL children so that they can lead a better and meaningful life (DesGeorges, 2016). Other than understanding and knowing the needs of HL children, parents need to interact more often with HL children. Parents who regularly interact such as responding, commenting, chatting and give compliments have shown positive changes in the relationship and communication between parents and children with HL (Shahida et al., 2012). Geers et al., 2017 states that parents and families who master sign language not only communicate well but also provide many other benefits to HL children.

The study of Shahida et al., 2012 suggests an important activity for the development of the relationship between HL children and parents that is the school provides activities like teaching parents to read story books to HL children using sign language. This activity can provide parents with experience and attention from HL children. The school may also host various activities or programs to enhance the sign language skills of parents and children such as sign language classes. Implementation of a school-sponsored program with parents is in line with Epstein's Parents Involvement Model, that emphasize close family relationships, improvement of academic performance and raising parental awareness. This model can provide guidance and cooperation between parents, school and community (Price, 2011).

Next, the MOE and Special Education Division should organize sign language classes or courses so that parents of HL children can learn sign language formally and in stages. Parents will pass the test in stages to ensure the quality of proficiency in sign language skills. The MOE and the Special Education Division have to work with parties such as the Federation of the Deaf or the Malaysian Federation of The Deaf (MFD) and the National Federation of the Deaf or The National Association of The Deaf (NAD) as sign language instructors. The parties should also issue a certificate of passing the sign language as evidence to the school when their child goes to school.

## CONCLUSSION

This study aimed to identify parent's skill level of communicating using sign language with HL children. The findings show that parents sign language skills are moderate. Parent skills level contribute to the development and improvement of HL children's academic performance. Various efforts are needed to better develop parents' sign language skills to ensure the future of HL children. Parent's mastery of the sign language guarantees the future of the HL child.

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