

# Journey of Ethiopian Sign Language and Deaf Education

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## ABSTRACT

The main objective of this article is to explore the journey of Ethiopian sign language and deaf education. It discloses emergence, practices, progresses and challenges of Ethiopian sign language and deaf education. The study is important in indicating the relevancy needed for educating people who are deaf and with hard hearing. The findings of the study indicate that deaf education in Ethiopia is characterized by absence of enough schools for the deaf and with information gap on the access of deaf education.

**Keywords:** Deaf; Ethiopia; Language; Deaf education

## INTRODUCTION

In Ethiopia, modern education grew up from the wombs of church education. As stated by the church education known as traditional education is believed to have had a highly structured and organized system since the introduction of Christianity between the years 341-346 A.D. The long tradition of church education had no educational provision for deaf children. Getaneh further states that. There is no document showing the participation of the deaf in both traditional and modern education system; it is true that formal education for the deaf did not appear prior the mid 1950's. The traditional forms of education had favored only the blind because the knowledge and concept development was based on auditory. Deaf people were often considered literally as "Donkoro", "Stupid", "Idiot", "those who cannot be enlightened" and uneducable segment of people in the society. In fact, the meaning and the significance of deafness were not fully grasped [1].

## LITERATURE REVIEW

If there is anything to speak about the history of deaf education, it can be traced back to the work of Carl Thompson and Lency Dorton who were US missionaries of the Church of Christ some 80 years ago. In 1961, these missionaries set up the first school in a rented building around Piazza Addis Ababa for some twenty students who were deaf. The first students who attended in former Ethiopian region Eritrea Karen School for the Deaf in Swedish Sign Language and Ethiopia US Missionary School

American Sign Language adapted to Ethiopian context and adding new Ethiopian signs laid foundation for the development of Ethiopian Sign Language. The missionaries used their home country sign languages of USA and Swedish for teaching and learning processes [2]. However, students who attended in these first schools and later became teachers produced the known Sheba Amharic Finger Alphabets. These alphabets acknowledged and recognized by deaf community and teachers. It is started to be implemented for teaching and learning purposes (Figure 1).

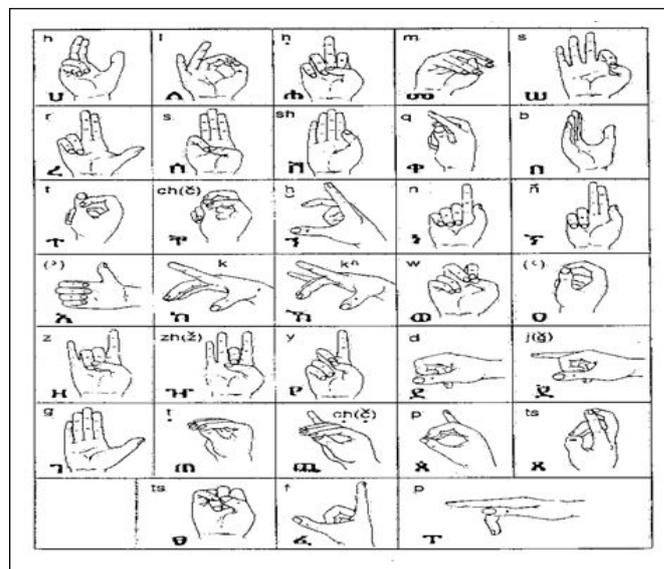


Figure 1: Ethiopian hand alphabetical symbols.

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**Received:** 13-Jan-2021, Manuscript No. JCDSHA-21-7937; **Editor assigned:** 18-Jan-2021 PreQC No. JCDSHA-21-7937 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 01-Feb-2021, QC No. JCDSHA-21-7937; **Revised:** 02-Jan-2023, Manuscript No. JCDSHA-21-7937 (R); **Published:** 30-Jan-2023, DOI: 10.35248/2375-4427.23.11.239

**Citation:** Basha T (2023) Journey of Ethiopian Sign Language and Deaf Education. J Commun Disord. 11:239.

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The graduate students from both schools in different places meetings and occasions started to use local Ethiopian sign languages. It is the first emergence and inspiration of Ethiopian sign language. This affirms Ethiopians started to use their own sign language. In 1963, the Ethiopian deaf association in collaboration with ministry of education prepared the first sign language book that help deaf community to communicate each other (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** The first Ethiopian sign language book.

In 1964, the efforts made by a young couple, helped the first school to be related in mekanissa area on a land donated by Princess tenagnework haileselasia, and the school was named after the princess youngest son, prince amha desta. Some decades ago, the school was renamed as Mekanissa school for the deaf. The Mekanissa school for the deaf, which was sponsored and subsidized by the church of the christ, also runs two branch schools namely the centeria and mazoria schools for the deaf. Until 1969, teachers used english language simultaneous communication as a means of instruction to teach deaf children in the school. The introduction of Amharic in total communication in the classroom in 1978 was underlying cause of the development of the first sign language text in Amharic language.

According to the American baptist missionaries established the second school alpha school for the deaf in 1966 in Addis Ababa. Tibebu reports that the missionaries taught the bible in American Sign Language (ASL) in lieu of academic subjects. In the 1970's, advocates of deaf education began strong campaign demanding the inclusion of deaf learners in the national education policy. In response to the campaign, the ministry of education assumed responsibility for running alpha school for the deaf. Alpha school for the deaf is one of the old government special schools in the country. Since it was established, it has

been providing educational services for deaf children. The school has been playing a central role in deaf culture and the deaf community as other special schools [3].

The Ethiopian evangelical Mekane Yesus church started the Hosanna school for the deaf in 1981. It is the only residential school which teaches both academic and vocational training up to high school level. The other school for the deaf is Harar school for the deaf. This African outreach school for the deaf was established in 1987 and is run by a donor agency called the Christopher blinder mission and other non-governmental agencies. Among the special schools in Ethiopia, vicktory school for the deaf was established in 2001 for the purpose of teaching the deaf of addis ababa, Ethiopia in collaboration of baptist international outreach. One of the deaf schools recently built in Nekemt is a Christian community-based rehabilitation program for children with a range of disabilities run by Ethiopian Mekane Yesus church. The school has an ongoing role in promoting education for the deaf throughout Ethiopia. The school uses exclusively sign language as a medium of instruction in the classroom. Beginning from 1961's-1990's the special education program was run only by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO). The non-governmental organizations advocating on behalf of students with disabilities also have had strong roles in developing and providing special education services in the country. Finish missionaries, Americans, Sweden and member of various protestant denominations have played important roles for the establishments of deaf schools. However, the schools reached only a small portion of the deaf population of the country. They tended to serve children from relatively affluent Ethiopians who live in urban areas, while most deaf Ethiopians lived in poor rural environments. Until now, the intake capacity of these schools is limited and the number of children being served remains small [4].

For the sign language management fay noted that missionaries from United States and Scandinavian started schools for the deaf children in Ethiopia. These missionaries taught using the sign languages and manual alphabets of their own countries, even though the primary languages of Ethiopia (e.g. Amharic) have different alphabets. Burton also comments on how foreign sign languages were introduced without regards given to indigenous signs. He contends that Europeans and Americans educators left the African education system like a shattered playground, and that the enforced use of foreign sign languages was disrespectful.

Fay further reported that Alpha school for the deaf at the beginning followed the examples of schools for the deaf in great Britain and France, which were oral and did not allow the use of any kind of manual communication, either signed or finger spelled but later converted to manual communication. Hosanna school for the deaf at its first emergence fully adopted 100% American sign language and alphabets, but later the school educators gradually developed some local iconic signs and spoken driven manually coded manual signs. Still now 60% of American sign language is used as means of instruction and communication, however, total communication controls the instruction system of special and inclusive schools of the country [5].

## DISCUSSION

### Progress of sign language and deaf education

At present, it seems that deaf students have access to education in residential schools, special day schools, special classes and regular schools where they are integrated with hearing students for better social and academic interaction. Above all, Television programs, which are sponsored by Ethiopian National Association of the Deaf (ENAD), for the deaf people presented in Ethiopian sign language on Ethiopian TV and other channels, research work which is undertaken by the linguistics department Addis Ababa University, and publication of Ethiopian sign language dictionary are the three noteworthy developments that have been made to promote the social and academic views of deaf education in sign language in the country [6].

In five universities special needs education departments and above six colleges sign language is carried out as common course in the country. Ministry of education is working hard in improving education system for persons with disabilities. In most regional states of the country cluster support centers are opened to children with disabilities. Sign language text books are prepared from preprimary school to grade twelve to be taught as a subject. These are great achievements and developments in sign language and deaf education. However, Ethiopian Sign Language (ETHSL) emerged relatively recently; its development is closely tied to the establishment of the first school for deaf students in Addis Ababa by American missionaries in 1963. Today, ETHSL is used by more than a million members of the Ethiopian deaf community, but it remains an under-researched language of Ethiopia [7].

### Challenges in deaf education

Deaf education in Ethiopia is not a recent development, since 1960's it has not shown significant improvements as was expected. In all schools, most of deaf teachers are hearing teachers. Teaching learning process is exact English/Amharic methods. The school situation in reality obliges deaf students to use artificial language that does not support for the development of sign language. The sign language practice is under influence of hearing teachers oral method of communication. Research conducted by stated that during teaching and learning process, there are limitations of sign language causes reading understanding problem. This indicates that the schools are poor in enabling sign language and reading understanding achievements for deaf learners. In addition, the finding of the study displayed that less contribution of signed english and amharic in the growth of natural sign language for deaf learners. The problem is not incapability of Ethiopian sign language but teachers lack linguistic competences how to teach deaf learners. If deaf children are exposed only to Signed English, they may exhibit "impaired potential for natural language acquisition and processing," impairment of their capacity to create and comprehend grammar, unless they are able to create their own linguistic structures [8].

### Sign language practices

In Ethiopia there are more than 80 indigenous spoken languages, which regional variations have been manifested in Ethiopian sign language lexicon. However, as a result of sociolinguistic factors such as language emergence and growth, convergence and wave phenomena, the variations have been able to converge into one major variety. Like other minority languages in the Ethiopian community, it is impossible for users of Ethiopian Sign Language (ETHSL) to avoid contact with Amharic and other languages. The deaf community communicates using this standard variety which has proved a major marker in defining the community resulting in a strong establishment of culture, a sense of identity, and understanding [9].

Ethiopian Sign Language (ETHSL) is, therefore, the visual gestural language that serves as the primary means of communication for deaf people in Ethiopia. While many Ethiopians still doubt Ethiopian sign language is a complete language like other sign languages, it is a formal, socially agreed-on, rule-governed symbol system that is generative in nature. However, Ethiopian sign language has the following linguistic characters:

- Five gestural features are known as the parameters of sign production.
- Sign language is articulated by single hand and both hands.
- Form and meaning in signed language may be arbitrary. Arbitrary words or signs show no link between their form and meaning.
- ETHSL has the signing space.

The signing space refers to an area which extends from approximately just above the head to the waist, and in width from elbow to elbow when the arms are held loosely bent. The components of Ethiopian sign language are not phoneme (sound) combinations that form words as in spoken languages, but rather are phonological combinations (i.e., hand shapes, hand positions, hand movements and orientation of the palm) of that signs [10].

Ethiopian sign language as other sign languages (ASL, BSL, SLF, etc) has its own linguistic behaviors. ETHSL primarily is used for instructional purposes. This creates a language environment that is more consistent and complete for children to take on as their own way of understanding and being understood. Alemayehu Teferi, former President of Ethiopian national association of the deaf, in his comment for Ethiopian sign language dictionary notes that ETHSL dictionary will be a clear evidence of having Ethiopians own sign language which completes language with all properties of language. Besides, it will pave the way for the development of further research in the study of Ethiopian sign language. Stated that publishing Ethiopian sign language dictionary that promoted Amharic sign language to Ethiopian Sign Language (ETHSL) in 2008, a language that entails national sign language. Beside the above positive developments, organizing conferences and lectures on sign languages and other deafness related issues in Ethiopia may bring about changes in sign language attitudes that reflect

changes in society and changes in attitudes toward sign language users and their education [11].

## CONCLUSION

Signs used in Ethiopian sign language are best described as visual, motor and spatial; ETHSL consists of movements, hand shapes, orientation, location and positions of specific body part, such as hands, arms, eyes, face and head. Concepts are executed with manual and other systematic non-manual signals. Therefore, ETHSL is independent of any spoken language used in Ethiopia and these signed languages fulfill all the criteria of a natural language. Stated that Ethiopian sign language and other spoken languages are equivalent in their communicative potentials, though different in their modes of expression. Similarly, Ethiopian sign language is not different from over 200 sign languages in the world, almost all with no official status of recognition. It can perform the same range of function as a spoken language and can be used to teach any aspect of the curriculum and scholarly studies.

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