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Learning Difficulties of Deaf Students in English Language Acquisition in Saudi Arabia: Challenges, Perceptions, and Recommendations

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Abstract

This study examines the learning difficulties experienced by deaf students to acquire the English language in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The research highlights the importance of developing appropriate teaching methods, improving educational environments, and to equip teachers with specialised skills to support deaf students. Using a descriptive quantitative design, data were collected through a questionnaire distributed in a community to focus on perceptions of English language importance, sign language knowledge, and challenges faced by deaf students. Findings indicate strong support from society for teaching English to deaf students, however significant barriers remain, plus inappropriate curricula, limited resources, and insufficient teacher preparation. The study recommends developing specialised curricula, enhancing teacher training, and creating a visual, sign-language based mobile application to support English learning for deaf students.

Keywords: deaf students, English language learning, Saudi Arabia, sign language, special education



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Introduction

English has become a global language, and it is used practically in all societies as a second or auxiliary language. It plays a central role in education, technology, research, politics, economics, and communication (Oder & Eisenschmidt, 2018). In Saudi Arabia, English is included in all educational programs at all levels, from elementary school to university (Al-Zahrani, 2018). The Saudi government has spent billions of dollars in educational institutions to support its citizens to acquire strong English proficiency (Nicolaidis, 2007).

Students with special needs, as well as those who are deaf or hearing impairment, are also encouraged to learn English. Teachers must understand the real circumstances of these students to help them master this universal knowledge and communicate effectively (Adi, Unsiah, & Fadhilah, 2017). According to the Saudi Ministry of Education (2016), more than 5,000 deaf students are enrolled in Saudi schools, mostly in segregated “Al-Amal Programs.” Deaf students face unique challenges in learning English. Their development of phonemes, syntax, and vocabulary is usually marked delayed due to the sounds they cannot take in (Dewi, Yawisah, & Siregar, 2019). They cannot comprehend information transmitted through noises, which might restrict their vocabulary development and exposure to spoken English (Musyoka, Gentry, & Bartlett, 2016). These challenges require important methods that are different from those used with normal students.

Communication methods for deaf students include sign language, oral methods, and total communication. Each offers different advantages depending on the student’s needs (Rahmah & Kholiq, 2018; Bergeron et al., 2020). Understanding these methods is crucial for designing effective English language curricula.

The purpose of this study is to identify the challenges faced by deaf students in learning English in Saudi Arabia, examine perceptions of English in society and sign language, and to propose recommendations to improve teaching practices.

Theoretical Review

Previous research provides important perceptions regarding the challenges faced by deaf students across different educational settings. In Indonesia, Zakia, Sunardi, and Yamtinah (2017) found that deaf students struggle to abstract concepts in science, have limited linguistic comprehension, and a lack of specialised learning resources. Teachers also face difficulty to simplify instructional language for deaf students.

In Saudi Arabia, Alrayes and Alahmed (2015) reported that the English curriculum is often irrelevant to the abilities of deaf students. They noted that deaf students rarely use English in



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daily life, teachers lack appropriate teaching aids, and multilingual dictionaries are not easily available.

Getnet (2019) found that communication difficulties in Ethiopian inclusive classrooms were most pronounced during listening and speaking lessons. Students struggled with automatic vocalisation and replication, consonant substitution, sound exclusion, and letter transposition.

Across these studies, a consistent theme emerges: deafness confines exposure to linguistic input, reduces opportunities for communication, and curbs communication with other individuals. These limitations lead to negative language acquisition and weaker adaptation skills, especially from a socio-constructivist learning perspective. Learning English presents additional challenges but also offers significant opportunities for technological development, academic studies, and cutting-edge global communication.

The current study presents research by examining the challenges faced by teachers in Saudi Arabia when teaching English to deaf students and exploring how these challenges differ statistically based on the variables, gender or years of experience.

Method

A descriptive quantitative design was used to provide a systematic and factual overview of the population and to analyse perceptions related to English language learning and sign language (Saunders et al., 2016). Participants were selected from the society through social media postings. The questionnaire targeted individuals from many educational backgrounds to evaluate the perceptions of English language importance, sign language knowledge, and challenges faced by deaf students. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data. It contains three sections: personal information, their views on the importance of the English language, and their knowledge of sign language. The questionnaire was distributed within the educational community, together with teachers, students, and parents. Data were analysed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, with means and percentages, were used to review responses.

Results

The purpose of this study was to examine perceptions of English language learning and sign language use in society for deaf students in Saudi Arabia. Descriptive statistics were produced to review participants' demographic characteristics and their responses to important questionnaire items. The findings indicate strong support for English language learning among deaf students, even though evident gaps remain in proficiency in sign language and awareness within the larger community.



1. Demographic Findings

A total of 89.4% of respondents were female, while only 10.6% were male, which indicates that the sample was largely composed of women. This gender distribution echoes the high participation of female educators and community members in online educational surveys in the region.

2. English Language Perceptions

The majority of respondents (80.6%) reported that they speak English, which suggests a quite high level of English proficiency within the sample. An even larger segment (94.7%) agreed that English is important for both hearing and deaf individuals. These findings reveal society's strong belief in the value of English as a universal language and as a tool for academic and professional progress.

3. Sign Language Perceptions

Although all respondents (100%) agreed that sign language is important for deaf individuals, only 10% agree to using sign language well, and 81.9% agreed that they don't use it at all. This discrepancy highlights a significant communication gap between the hearing community and deaf individuals. Even after recognising its importance, most participants lack the skills to communicate effectively in sign language.

4. Perceptions of Deaf Students' Abilities

A majority of participants (71.3%) believed that deaf students can learn English, which reflects their confidence in the intellectual and linguistic talent of deaf students. Also, 87.2% agreed that learning English would make deaf students feel proud, which suggests that English proficiency is related to boosting confidence, empowerment, and social inclusion.

5. Summary of Findings

Table 1 presents a detailed summary of the key findings, together with demographic information and participants' responses to questions related to English and sign language. This table provides a clear overview of the distribution of responses across the main variables.

Variable / Question	Response Options	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	10.6
	Female	89.4
Do you speak English?	Yes	80.6
	No	19.4

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Is English important?	Yes	94.7
	Maybe	10
Do you use sign language well?	Yes	10
	No	81.9
	Maybe	14.9
Is sign language important for deaf individuals?	Yes	100
Can deaf students master English?	Yes	71.3
	No	10
	Maybe	23.4
	Absolutely	5
	Don't know	5
Will learning English improve their lives?	Yes	64.9
	Maybe	33
	No	5
Will teaching English benefit the homeland?	Yes	79.6
	Maybe	17.2
	No	5
Will deaf students feel proud learning English?	Yes	87.2
	Maybe	11.7
	No	5

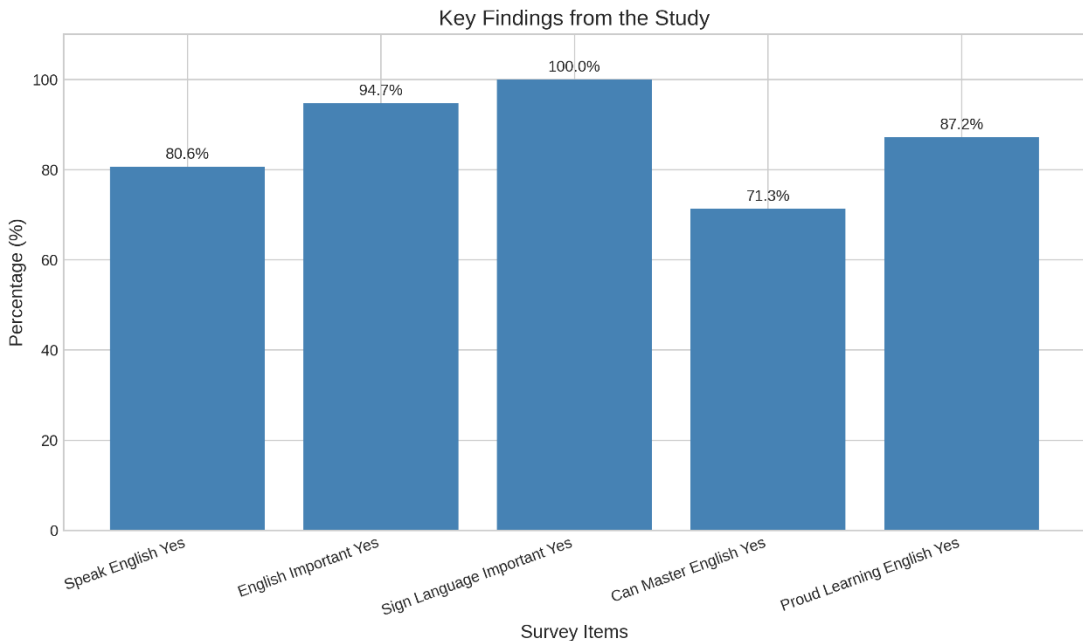
Table 1

Note. Percentages show responses from participants regarding English language importance, sign language knowledge, and perceptions of deaf students' learning abilities.



To visually represent the most significant findings, a vertical bar chart was created (Figure 1). This figure highlights the high levels of agreement regarding the importance of English and sign language, as well as positive perceptions of deaf students' ability in learning English.

Figure 1



Note. This figure displays the major positive responses regarding English and sign language perceptions.

Overall, the results show the strong support for English language learning in the society for the deaf students, but also expose a lack of sign language proficiency in the society and among the community members. This gap will curb communication opportunities and affect the learning experiences of deaf students in normal and specialised educational settings.

Discussion

The findings show strong support for teaching English to deaf students in the society in Saudi Arabia. Participants recognise the importance of English for personal development and national development. But the results also highlight significant challenges, including inadequate curricula, limited teaching resources, and a lack of proper teacher training.

The lack of sign language proficiency among community members suggests a communication gap that may affect deaf students' learning experiences. Even though sign



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language is widely recognised as essential, its limited use in the community curbs opportunities for communication and support.

These findings match with previous research, which shows that deaf students face linguistic, cognitive, and environmental barriers in foreign language learning (Alrayes & Alahmed, 2015; Zakia et al., 2017; Getnet, 2019). To address these challenges, it requires all-inclusive reforms in curriculum design, teacher training preparation, and educational resources.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the complex and complicated challenges faced by deaf students in learning the English language within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Even though the attitudes in the society toward English and sign language are very positive, the educational system continues to struggle to provide the deaf students with the needed resources, teaching methods, and the much-needed supportive environments. The results demonstrate that deaf students are blessed with the same intellectual potential and motivation to learn as their hearing peers, but their progress is delayed by organisational barriers such as inappropriate curricula, limited exposure to accessible instructional materials, and insufficient teacher training preparation in deaf education and sign-supported pedagogy.

The study further reveals a significant gap between the importance of sign language and the actual proficiency of the community in using it. This gap shortens communication opportunities for deaf students and reduces their access to meaningful interaction, which is an essential component of language acquisition. Addressing this gap is very crucial to develop inclusive learning environments where deaf students can bloom academically, socially, and emotionally.

Finally, empowering deaf students with English proficiency spreads beyond academic achievement. It strengthens their confidence, expands their access to universal knowledge, boosts their chances of getting employed, and will eventually contribute to the national development goals. By investing in inclusive educational practices and accepting innovative technological solutions, Saudi Arabia can confirm that deaf students are not only supported but fully enabled to reach their maximum potential.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to improve English language learning for deaf students in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. These recommendations address curriculum design, teacher preparation, educational strategies, and larger community involvement.



1. Specialised Curriculum

Developing a specialised English curriculum for deaf students is important because the current curriculum doesn't match their linguistic needs. A revised curriculum should depend on visual learning, simplified sentence structure, sign-supported explanations, and multimodal resources (text-video) that decrease dependence on hearing input. By adapting content to the cognitive and communication strengths of deaf students, educators can provide more easy access to English language learning.

2. Educational Resources and Tools

Schools must be equipped with suitable educational resources and aids to support deaf students' English learning. This includes captioned videos, visual dictionaries, interactive software, and necessary hearing-assistive technologies. By providing these tools, it will help the deaf students to practice English content through accessible, visually rich materials that develop their understanding and participation.

3. Technology-Based Solutions

Integrating technology into English classrooms can significantly improve the learning outcomes of deaf students. A dedicated mobile application designed specifically for deaf students, which has features like grammar explanatory videos, sign-supported vocabulary, and interactive reading and writing tasks, and it would offer personalised, flexible learning opportunities. Mobile-based educational programs are increasingly recognised as effective tools for improving the academic performance and engagement of students with learning difficulties. (Khatoun et al., 2022). Technology can bridge gaps in access and will support continuous learning beyond the classroom.

4. Further Research

Further research is needed to develop the understanding of deaf students' learning needs and to evaluate the effectiveness of educational strategies. Future studies should examine how sign language proficiency affects English language acquisition, how different teaching methods influence learning outcomes, and how regional and cultural differences outline educational challenges. Continued research will support and nurture evidence-based developments in deaf education system across Saudi Arabia.

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