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DEAF COMMUNITY'S EXPECTATIONS ON THE ROLES OF SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS

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Abstract

The United Nations has adopted the 2030 agenda with its 17 sustainable development goals in order to achieve sustainable development for all including the disabled. Disability is also referred to in various parts in the agenda, such as in quality education, decent work and economic growth, reduced inequality and so on. As Malaysia has embraced the agenda, this paper aims to study the role of the Malaysian Sign Language Interpreters (SLIs) in helping the Deaf community in terms of enhancing earning the power to fulfil their life needs, their level of knowledge and capability to achieve sustainable development. The study was carried out using questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The results show that the existing roles, as well as future roles suggested to be played by SLIs in assisting the Deaf to achieve sustainable development, are mainly to provide various communication assistance. In addition, there is a positive relationship between the roles of SLIs, Malaysian Federation of the Deaf (MFD), Deaf associations, non-government organization (NGOs), government-linked company (GLCs), community and the Malaysian government to address the welfare of the Deaf community in order to realize the 2030 agenda. Findings also reveal that sustainable development of the Deaf is closely related to the sustainability of Malaysian Sign Language (MySL) and the roles their parents and families play.

Keywords: Disability, deaf, sustainable development, sign language, sign language interpreters.

1. Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations adopted a new 2030 agenda based on the principle of 'leaving no one behind'. There are 17 sustainable development goals that need to be attained in order to achieve sustainable development for all (UN Web Services Section, n.d.a). The Office of The Prime Minister of Malaysia (2015, September 29) released a media statement to express its commitment to support and implement the 2030 agenda. Malaysia is ambitious and has taken initiatives in achieving the 2030 agenda with its 17 sustainable development goals, and these include the well-being of a person with disabilities. The Ministry of Woman, Family and Community Development (2016) developed an action plan for people with disabilities and named it '*Pelan Tindakan Orang Kurang Upaya (2016-2022)*' (The Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities 2016-2022). This action plan comes with 10 core strategies to address human rights issues of the disabled and to enable these people to live independently in supporting Malaysia's commitment towards the 2030 agenda. Therefore one of the actions to be taken for this matter, under core strategy 1, that is "Improving the accessibility of the disabled" (cf. The Ministry of Woman, Family and Community Development, 2016), aims to ensure more provision to the sign language interpreters (SLIs) for the Deaf. The notion of sustainable development is defined as,…development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs….therefore it calls for concerted efforts towards building an inclusive, sustainable and resilient future for people and planet". (UN Web Services Section, n.d.b). The definition shows it is crucial for steps to be taken now to enable people with disabilities to survive, whilst the accessibility of the disabled need to be improved so that they will be able to live independently in future. These actions are also important for the betterment of future generations.

According to the 2015 statistics report by the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia (2015), there are 8% hearing-impaired individuals out of 365,677 persons with disabilities, which comprised of 29,254 Deaf individuals in Malaysia. This shows that the Deaf community is large in number in Malaysia and their needs should be addressed in order for the country to achieve sustainable development for all. Although the action plan and statistical report reveal increased demand for SLIs, Malaysia is somehow still facing acute shortage of accredited SLIs (Che Omar, 2009; Lucy Lim, 2009; personal communication, 2017). There are only 14 accredited SLIs providing their services to the Deaf community nationwide, through the Malaysian Federation of the Deaf (MFD) (Malaysia Federation of the Deaf, n.d).

Previous researches on the Deaf in Malaysia studied mainly the Malaysian Sign Language (MySL) and the education of the Deaf (e.g., Yahaya-Isa, 2004; Ibrahim, 2017). However, with few exceptions (Chew & Mat Yassim, 2009; Che Omar, 2009; Ho, 2009; Lucy Lim, 2009), not much research has been done to study sign language interpreting in Malaysia. To date, research on the roles of Malaysian SLIs in helping the Deaf to achieve sustainable development has not been found. Therefore, it is legitimate for this paper to study the existing and expected future roles of SLIs in helping the Malaysian Deaf community to enhance their earning power to fulfil their life's needs, level of knowledge and capability in order for them to achieve sustainable living. In contrast to prior studies, the current study explores the research topic from three different perspectives, namely the SLIs' perspectives, the Deaf community's perspectives and the perspectives of the parents of the Deaf.

2.   Problem Statement

In Malaysia, the Malaysian Sign Language (MySL), which is also known as *Bahasa Isyarat Malaysia* (BIM) in Malay, is used in the Deaf Community. In addition to BIM, there are also several other types of sign language widely used by the deaf community such as the Manually Coded Malay (known as *Kod Tangan Bahasa Melayu* (KTBM), which has been modified from the American Sign Language (ASL) and is used in schools for the Deaf for the purpose of teaching and learning of the Malay Language), total communication, cued speech and not forgetting fingerspelling (Che Omar, 2009). However, people with hearing problems will first communicate using home signs when they were small, until they were taught later with KTBM, BIM or other types of communication style for communication and learning purposes. SLIs play an important role in helping the Deaf to understand spoken languages or to convey their messages in various fields such as medicine, education, religious, personal matters as well as formal and informal arrangements including opening ceremonies, conferences, meetings, seminars and so on (Penang Deaf Association, 2015). Based on the data from the '*Permohonan perkhidmatan jurubahasa isyarat 2015*' (sign language interpreter service application 2015) written by the Malaysian Association of Sign Language Interpreter, MyASLI (2015a), to date, 2969 services had been provided. The breakdown of types of interpreting services requested by the Deaf is presented in Table 01 below.

Table 01. Types of interpreting services

Types of interpreting services	Frequency	Types of interpreting services	Frequency
Employment	144	Private matter: Police station	41
Court case	90	Private matter: Banking/Finance	18
Medical	266	Private matter: Phone interpreting	801
Education	57	Private matter: Others	482
Sport	59	Official matter: Meeting	237
Religious matter	107	Official matter: Seminar/Workshop	293
Private matter: Marriage	8	Official matter	282
Private matter: Work matter	84		
Total	**2969**		

(Source: Malaysian Association of Sign Language Interpreter, 2015a)

Various studies on the Malaysian Deaf community and MySL have been carried out and the focus was mainly on education. For instance, studies have been done on the support and obstacles faced by students with disabilities in institutions of higher education in Malaysia that were conducted by Toran, Mohd Yasin, Tahar, and Sujak (2009), the Fard Ain's basic curriculum in MySL for the Deaf (Mohd Rashid, 2015), perceptions of the Deaf and hearing communities on the establishment of MySL in schools and the readiness of MySL training centres in providing trainers for the establishment (Muslim, Shaari, & Abu,

2013), and effective teaching and learning methods (Alias, Mohd Sharif, Baharuddin, Meor Hamzah, & Zahari, 2016; Ibrahim, 2017).

Numerous studies have been carried out on the education of the deaf and the ones performed by Che Omar (2009), Chew and Mat Yassim (2009), Ho (2009) and Lucy Lim (2009) addressed sign language interpreting and SLIs in Malaysia. Che Omar (2009) discussed information on hearing impairment, the connection between hearing impairment with sign language, translation and sign language as well as sign language interpreting. Chew and Mat Yassim (2009) conducted introspective research to compare and contextualize the similarities and differences between signed and spoken language interpreting from the perspective of practising SLIs. Ho (2009) discussed the application of ELAN (Eudico Linguistic Annatator) programme in MySL interpreting and analysis which has enabled the Deaf to provide their feedback and evaluate the SLIs' interpreting skills. Using questionnaires involving Deaf and hearing respondents, Lucy Lim (2009) studied the characteristics, attitudes, skills and professionalism that should be possessed by a competent SLI. She also suggests that soft skill elements such as assertiveness, self-confidence and self-esteem should be integrated into SLI interpreting courses. These pioneer studies on sign language interpreting and SLIs reflect the importance of SLIs' role within the Deaf community. Taking into account that the roles of SLIs in helping the Deaf in achieving sustainable development have not been well addressed in previous studies, this paper aims to identify the existing and future roles of SLIs, and their contributions to the current and future life of the Deaf community.

3. Research Questions

The research questions for this study are: i) What are the existing and future roles of SLIs? ii) How do these roles contribute to the current and future life of the Deaf community?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is: i) to identify the existing and future roles of SLIs; and (ii) to understand the contribution of SLIs to the current and future life of the Deaf community.

5. Research Methods

This research adopts a qualitative case study method that emphasizes on extensive and in-depth data collection of respondents' perceptions on the research topic to understand the current state from three different perspectives. The first stage involved a survey among 8 Deaf individuals in Kuala Lumpur and 10 Deaf individuals in Penang, consisting of 7 males and 11 females and whose ages range between 19-53. The open-ended questionnaire requested the respondents to fill in their demographic profile, as well as answering questions pertaining to the roles of SLIs in helping them to achieve sustainable development. In addition, 5 Deaf parents with deaf and/or hearing children in Kuala Lumpur and 4 in Penang, consisting of 3 males and 6 females and whose ages range from 29-53, answered another set of open-ended questionnaire. The open-ended questionnaire required the respondents to fill in their demographic profile, followed by answering questions pertaining to the roles of parents and SLIs in helping their children to achieve sustainable development. An open-ended questionnaire was used as it was the most time-saving method to

collect extensive data from the Deaf. Researchers were available for clarification when respondents were answering the questionnaires.

The second stage involved a series of semi-structured interviews with 4 accredited SLIs, 2 in Penang and 2 in Kuala Lumpur with 17-18 years of interpreting experiences. First, the respondents were required to fill in their demographic and working profiles. Next, questions pertaining to their roles in helping the Deaf to achieve sustainable development were asked. The sample allowed different perspectives towards a specific topic to be collected. Both questionnaires and interviews began with an explanation of the research objectives and guaranteed anonymity.

6. Findings

Through a content analysis of all data, the themes associated with the topic of research were categorized. Findings related to the roles of SLIs in helping the Deaf to achieve sustainable development from three different perspectives were extracted from the questionnaires and interviews. To facilitate the description of the findings, data from three groups of respondents are discussed under each theme that has been identified.

6.1. Existing roles of SLIs

- Existing roles of SLIs to enhance the earning power of the Deaf

The existing roles of SLIs in enhancing the earning power of the Deaf from the perspectives of SLIs are identified and presented in Table 02.

Table 02. Existing roles of SLIs in helping the Deaf to enhance their earning power (SLIs' perspectives)

Roles	Examples
Obtain employment	• Help to find suitable jobs • Attend job interviews with the Deaf
Facilitate business process	• Explain services offered to clients • Explain business ideas to get loans and sponsors
Help the Deaf feel confident at work	• Attend work training with the Deaf • Explain working processes and responsibilities

As indicated in Table 02, three main roles of SLIs associated with enhancing the earning power of the Deaf were identified. According to the SLIs, they help the Deaf to obtain suitable jobs and assist them in job interviews. Meanwhile for those who wish to start or are currently running their own businesses, SLIs help to facilitate communication between them and the hearing, and this includes explaining their services to potential clients and also helping them to apply for loans and sponsorship. The important role of SLI in helping the Deaf to feel confident at work is made explicit by one of the SLIs when she mentioned the following:

"Since we explained to them how to complete their tasks, they understand their roles and feel more confident and at ease in implementing their tasks. Compared to the situations where they attended courses and training without SLIs, they could not understand detailed practices that were merely based on the notes given (Translation)".

The findings above are supported by information gathered from the survey of Deaf individuals, in which respondents had admitted that SLIs helped them to get employments. The role of facilitating the business process is also clearly elaborated by a Deaf respondent who runs his own business, "I found it easier to communicate during meetings and dealings with customers who wanted to place orders with the help of SLIs (Translation)". In contrary, another respondent explained that his job involved only writing so he did not require assistance from SLIs.

From the survey on the parents of the Deaf, a majority of the respondents did not present their opinion regarding enhancing the earning power of Deaf individuals. A possible reason is that their children are still in schools. Only one respondent said that SLIs have helped her child in learning life skills and no further explanation was needed apart from the signing by the SLIs. According to one of the SLIs, "Basically, the role of SLIs is not much, we only convey the messages in communication, the organizer is the one who helps them to achieve the business goal. We will not ask how, as we must obey ethics (Translation)". This is also supported by another SLI when she explained this, "Officially, the responsibilities of SLIs are limited as we mainly assist in the communication (Translation)". This finding is in line with the general ethics principles for interpreters, in which interpreters must ensure that they do not take on the roles of other professionals (Ayob, 2013, p. 171).

The above findings show that the roles of the SLIs in helping the Deaf to enhance their earning power to fulfil life's needs and achieve sustainable development are really about facilitating communication. The success in enhancing their earning power mainly depends on the effort and hard work of the Deaf individuals.

- Existing roles of SLIs to enhance the level of knowledge of the Deaf

The existing roles of SLIs in enhancing the level of knowledge of the Deaf from the perspectives of SLIs are illustrated in Table 03.

Table 03. Existing roles of SLIs in enhancing the level of knowledge of the Deaf (SLIs' perspectives)

Roles	Examples
Facilitate knowledge transfer	• Provide a better understanding in educational institutions • Provide a better understanding in workshops, seminars, speeches and so on • Help the Deaf to voice out their enquiries
Share the latest news and information	• Provide the latest news and information on current issues
Ensure validity of information	• Research and explain to the Deaf to avoid fake news

As can be seen in Table 03, three important roles are related to enhancing the level of knowledge. The first role of SLIs is to facilitate knowledge transfer in educational and informational settings. According to two SLIs, "Explanation through speech and writing in the slides are different from explanations given through sign language. The Deaf can understand sign language better, so SLIs provide further explanation to the Deaf by using sign language (Translation)". This finding is consistent with the findings from the survey of the Deaf where several Deaf respondents said that the availability of SLIs has enabled the Deaf to understand the contents of workshops, seminars, speeches, lectures and the likes more easily. Seven Deaf

individuals also said that SLIs have assisted them to enhance their religious knowledge, such as Al-Quran and Fard Ain, and knowledge on Christianity.

Findings also show that the SLIs role in enhancing the level of knowledge are not only limited to providing sign language interpreting in formal contexts, but include the sharing of latest information and news on current issues informally via conversations between the SLIs and the Deaf. The important role of SLIs in ensuring the Deaf have access to valid information is clearly elaborated by one SLI when she explained this:

> "The Deaf are technology literate, sometimes they already knew [the latest news] and asked us. The only problem is Facebook contains a lot of fake news, they might just believe them, so it is our responsibility to tell them that they are not happening and why we have to explain….If the SLI does not know about it, he/she might not be able to explain it to the Deaf on the spot, but the interpreter will spend some time to study and understand the matter, then explain it to the Deaf (Translation)".

Another interesting finding demonstrates the diversified mediation roles of SLIs and the technology literacy of the Deaf in which the Deaf are made known that interpreting services are also provided virtually. This is well elaborated by a SLI, when she explained that, "Sometimes they (the Deaf) are busy with their jobs or stay far away from the associations, so they will request for a video call (Translation)".

Besides that, MFD provides avenues for special education at pre-school level for Deaf children. According to the findings from the survey on the parents of the Deaf, pre-school education provided by MFD enables their children to start learning proper sign language and sign language communication skills.

The above findings indicate that SLIs are mainly playing their roles to help Deaf adults in enhancing their level of knowledge, while hearing or Deaf teachers in kindergartens play important roles in helping Deaf preschool children to improve their knowledge, sign language, communication skills and other relevant skills for their well-being. As a whole, besides other bodies (which is not within the scope of this small survey) MFD could be said to be one of the most important body in providing facilities and assistance for the Deaf to achieve their sustainable development in Malaysia.

- Existing roles of SLIs to enhance the capability to achieve sustainable development of the Deaf

The existing roles of SLIs in enhancing the capability of the Deaf from the perspectives of SLIs are shown in Table 04.

Table 04. Existing roles of SLIs to enhance the capability of the Deaf to achieve sustainable development (SLIs' perspectives)

Roles	Examples
Explore continuous learning opportunities for the Deaf	• Provide details of courses and activities available • Suggest and encourage the Deaf to join courses (skills or entrepreneurship)
Facilitate self-improvement process	• Attend courses and join activities with the Deaf

As indicated in Table 04, two roles of SLIs associated with enhancing the capability to achieve sustainable living were identified. Findings show that SLIs are requested to explore continuous learning

opportunities for the Deaf by providing details of courses which the Deaf are interested in and that are relevant to their well-being. For instance, SLIs are at times requested to make phone calls to obtain information, such as enquiring about enrolment fees and so on. The determination of the Deaf in enhancing self-capability is well elaborated by one of the SLIs when she mentioned that, "Sometimes they want to enrol into activities which are not specifically offered to the Deaf. They would like to join some particular activities as they wish to be treated like others (hearing people) (Translation)".

SLIs also play a proactive role in suggesting and encouraging the Deaf to take up certain courses, if they know the interests of certain Deaf individuals and they have come across those relevant courses. SLIs also accompany Deaf individuals for courses or activities and convey the information that they obtained from the courses/activities to the Deaf in order to facilitate the self-improvement process. However this means extra enrolment fee that needs to be paid for the accompanying SLI, a cost that the Deaf might have to bear. The above findings show that the major roles of SLIs in helping the Deaf to enhance their capabilities to achieve sustainable development are also focused on communication.

6.2. Future roles of SLIs in helping the Deaf to achieve sustainable development

The future roles of SLIs in helping the Deaf to achieve sustainable development from three different perspectives are identified and presented in Table 05.

Table 05. Future roles of SLIs

Respondent	Examples
SLIs	• Improve knowledge on the latest information and current issues
Deaf	• Increase the number of SLIs • Make SLIs available in all universities, colleges, hospitals and banks • Offer 24-hour video relay service (VRS) • Provide high-speed data at a reasonable price for the Deaf to use VRS • Provide subtitles in online tutorials
Parents of the Deaf	• Provide sign language interpreting in every electronic device • Provide subtitles in all TV/Multimedia programmes • Increase cooperation between the government and NGOs to help improve the capabilities of the Deaf to achieve sustainable development

As presented in Table 05, the Deaf and parents of the Deaf have more expectations towards the new roles of SLIs, which are also mainly on communication. According to all SLIs, they need to be up-to-date with the latest information and current issues in order to be able to help the Deaf and this initiative is made explicit through an example given by one of the SLIs,

"For example, I am not an expert in information technology, so when I was interpreting in IT department, I find it difficult to convey technical message accurately. And the Deaf will take a lot of time if they are left to learn a language or a skill by themselves. Thus, I feel that I should improve myself in order to help the Deaf (Translation)".

This finding shows that SLIs are proactive in improving themselves from time to time and this is in line with the annual skill enhancement workshops organised by the Malaysian Association of Sign

Language Interpreter (MyASLI) to ensure improvement in communication skills of the SLIs in order to fulfil the communication needs of the Deaf (Malaysian Association of Sign Language Interpreter, 2014, 2015b).

Several mutual expectations between the Deaf and their parents were identified, namely to increase the number of SLIs, and making sign language interpreting and subtitles available at any time, anywhere, in all electronic devices and all TV/Multimedia programmes. These expectations of receiving equivalent amount of information as hearing individuals are clearly indicated by one of the respondents' statement, "Provide subtitles or sign language interpreting in every drama, cartoons and so on to facilitate the Deaf to get equivalent information (Translation)". Five respondents hope that sign language interpreting will be provided at universities and colleges so that they can further their studies there. All respondents unanimously said that the major constraint for them to get SLIs assistance is the insufficient numbers of SLIs. All SLIs also stated that the small number of existing SLIs is the major constraint for them to assist the Deaf extensively. When multiple applications for SLI services are received at the same time, the approvals are made based on priority and urgency. Sometimes they have no choice but to sideline certain applications. According to SLIs, although initiatives have been taken to encourage interested volunteers to become SLIs, acute low pay is the major factor deterring them to become SLIs as the society does not appreciate sign language interpreting or have wrong perceptions that SLIs are volunteers, hence, the services are given out for free. This is well-elaborated when one SLI explained that, "When we told them the rate, they (the clients) will say they have no budget, they will either ask for discounts, cancel the SLIs' services or ask the Deaf not to join the event (Translation)". This finding also reflects that Malaysians are ignorant to the needs of the Deaf in improving themselves and this illustrates that efforts to raise awareness on the welfare of the Deaf among Malaysians need to be stepped up. Requesting SLI's services outside working hours, such as late at night and during weekends, are reasons why the needs of the Deaf could not be fulfilled. At times, SLI rejects a service request mainly because the interpreting contents are contrary to the SLI's personal principles and moral acceptability that s/he could not compromise. Besides that, expectations of the Deaf and parents of the Deaf as reported in Table 05 could not only be referred to as the future roles that should be played by SLIs, but also the future roles that should be considered and played collectively by SLIs, MFD, other Malaysian deaf associations, NGOs, GLCs, community and the Malaysia government. Thus, in this small scope of study, we can see that a positive relationship is already in place for these parties.

6.3. Parents' roles in helping the Deaf to achieve sustainable development

Besides SLIs who could play their roles in helping the Deaf to achieve sustainable development, findings show that Deaf parents are also playing proactive roles in preparing and ensuring their hearing or deaf children are able to achieve sustainable development in education and life. These include ensuring their children study the syllabus developed by the Ministry of Education Malaysia, sending their children to kindergartens, Schools for Special Needs Children, Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) programmes and tuition centres, and teaching their children using teaching aids so that they can learn effectively and will be able to adapt to the society.

6.4. The sustainability of MySL towards the sustainable development of the Deaf

Sustainable development of the Deaf is found closely related to the sustainable development of MySL. Globalisation has its impact on the development of MySL; new vocabularies are borrowed into MySL and this is well illustrated by one of the SLIs when she explained the following:

"For example, the word 'inclusive[1]' is unknown to the Deaf, so we (SLIs) will explain its meaning with sign language, if the Deaf community accepts the word, they will create a sign for it and spread among themselves. Then, SLIs will learn the sign from them (Translation)".

This finding shows that the Deaf community is actively accepting new vocabularies in order to access the latest knowledge for sustainable development. SLIs too contribute to the sustainability of MySL by conveying the new vocabularies to the Deaf, learning new signs created by the Deaf and spreading them through interpreting. This is supported by the remark of another SLI that states that "We do not create sign, because the sign language belongs to the Deaf, however SLIs have to know and learn the signs (Translation)". Besides that, Deaf parents also use MySL to communicate with their Deaf and hearing children at homes to ensure the sustainability of MySL, which is significant to enable effective communication and knowledge transfer for sustainability in their families.

According to all SLIs, sign language development projects are carried out every year, these include the publications of sign language books, such as books on idioms and verbs, as well as offering MySL workshops or classes to the public and government or private agencies. Sometimes, SLI volunteers try to raise awareness of the existence of the Deaf, MySL and SLIs by providing sign language interpreting in some programmes even though Deaf individuals are not involved in those programmes.

7. Conclusion

The findings obtained in this study showed that the existing and expected key service role of SLIs is to provide diversified communication assistance to ensure effective two-way communication of valid information between the Deaf and the hearing in order to help the Deaf community to achieve sustainable development. The Deaf hope for more people to join the ranks of the SLIs to fulfil the constant demands. In addition to that, the increment of SLIs' service rates or salaries is believed to be an effective way that can further encourage the rise in the number of SLIs in Malaysia to cater for the extensive needs. Malaysians should also be more sensitive to the communication needs of the Deaf community and should play their role in providing communication assistance. Sustainable development of MySL is significant to ensure effective communication and knowledge transfer for sustainable development of the Deaf. Therefore, efforts on sign language development should be continued. On the other hand, a significant relationship was not found between the SLIs' role and Deaf preschool children in sustainable development. This could be due to the fact that their major needs in learning are currently being addressed by their parents and kindergarten teachers. In short, SLIs, MFD, other Malaysian deaf associations, NGOs, GLCs, communities and the Malaysian government are expected to play their roles in addressing the welfare and expectations of the Deaf community. Thus, assistance and roles expected by the Deaf community should be taken into

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[1] 'Inclusive' here is referring to 'inclusive education' where children with and without disabilities participate and learn together in the same classes.

account by these parties for the realization of the 2030 agenda in order to achieve sustainable development for all. Through this principle, none of the Deaf will be left behind without proper guidance and assistance.

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