



Evidence-Based Research on Bilingual Deaf Education for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children

Executive Summary

This Study was conducted to examine trends in research and practice regarding bilingual deaf education (an educational approach where sign language is the first language and spoken language literacy is learned as a second language) for deaf children in developed countries, and to verify its effectiveness.

Since the 1970s, the limitations of traditional oralism and total communication, which utilized all possible means including oral speech, sign language, lip-reading, and gestures, have been criticized as contributing to the academic underachievement of deaf children. Furthermore, against the backdrop of academic recognition that sign language is a language and growing interest in Deaf culture, an educational model focusing on developing literacy in a spoken language based on the natural development of sign language was proposed. Bilingual-bicultural education, emphasizing the use of natural sign language as the educational language and the formation of Deaf identity and self-esteem, expanded primarily in Northern Europe and North America.

Multiple studies support the findings that early access to natural sign language does not hinder spoken language acquisition and that bilingual-bicultural education has certain benefits for developing social-emotional skills, self-esteem, and Deaf identity. However, it has also become clear that evidence demonstrating age-appropriate academic achievement, particularly in reading comprehension, is limited, and that criticism exists regarding the theoretical foundation.

Since the 21st century, against the backdrop of widespread newborn hearing screening, advances in assistive hearing technologies including cochlear implants, and the expansion of inclusive education, many deaf children in developed countries tend to learn in mainstream schools. Consequently, the focus of deaf education research has shifted toward “the importance of early access to sign language” and “creating learning environments for children with cochlear implants.” Concurrently, a new option in bilingual deaf education is expanding: bimodal bilingual education. This approach utilizes assistive hearing technologies like cochlear implants to combine sign language with spoken language.

Analysis of the situations in the Philippines and Laos suggests that in contexts lacking adequate hearing healthcare infrastructure and early intervention systems, bilingual deaf education can be a realistic and effective option as an educational approach not reliant on spoken language acquisition. However, structural challenges were also identified: a shortage of teachers proficient in natural sign language, the impact of manually coded sign (a form of manual communication representing spoken words with signs), alignment with inclusive education policies, and severe language deprivation—where delayed exposure to natural language in early childhood negatively impacts cognitive development.

Supporting bilingual deaf education in developing countries is not merely a choice of educational method; it signifies addressing complex challenges: guaranteeing language rights and ensuring the quality of learning. This Study concludes that the areas requiring support are: according to each country's context, ensuring early access to sign language; positioning sign language as a medium of instruction in formal education; and continuously accumulating evidence on the effectiveness of bilingual deaf education, alongside the sustained development of specialized personnel capable of teaching in sign language.