

Syntax in the Written Language of Normal Hearing and Hearing Impaired Students of the 8th Standard : A Comparative Study

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"He give man speech,
and speech created thought,
which is the measure of the Universe."

-Percy Bysshe Shelley

The hearing impaired have a tough task ahead of them in terms of communication. Speech would be difficult because of their faulty perception of the speech sounds resulting in many defects of articulation as well as defects in the voice and resonance, which are the result of limited auditory feedback. The use of signs has often been advocated, but there limited flexibility as there are more people who do not understand signs than those who do, especially in India.

Hence, one of the most valuable modes of communication to the hearing impaired is writing, the one mode which is read by large numbers of people. It is difficult for a child to jump to writing however, if he has not acquired the art of communicating through some other means, as reported by several researchers. Teaching a child to directly read and write without his having internalised the rules of his language, results in difficulty with sentence construction. This is precisely what is being done in many places with the hearing impaired however, mainly from the point of view of the examinations these students have to sit for.

Little importance is carried out to see how much the hearing impaired can really implement writing for effective communication. This study was carried out to compare the ability of hearing impaired students, to handle writing in two different types of tasks, with the same ability in normal hearing students who have had the same amount of coaching.

The two types of tasks involved were a picture description task (Task I) and a story narration task which was combined with an essay writing task as Task II. Task I was of a simpler nature than Task II. All responses were collected in the written form in Kannada.

Fifteen samples of the hearing impaired and thirteen of the normal hearing were finally considered for analysis. The results of either group of samples were then compared for overall performance, as well as outputs for each task. The results did show a difference between normal hearing and hearing impaired students, in the way they used written language.

The hearing group gave a lower output than the normal hearing group, as predicted, both in terms of the total output as well as the output of nouns, verbs and syntax markers considered separately. This result is in accordance with the results of studies done earlier, by researchers in English, eg. Myklebust, Kretschmer and Kretschmer, etc.

The mean words per sentence used by the hearing impaired is lower than that used by the normal hearing students, a possible consequence of lower output of the handicapped students.

They also made a larger number of errors in the usage of the different word classes in terms of sentence construction, context and punctuation. Spelling mistakes however, were observed to occur more in the samples of the normal hearing, rather than the hearing impaired students.

The hearing impaired also performed more poorly on the relatively more abstract tasks of story narration and essay writing than on the more concrete task of picture description.

These show that the hearing impaired have a very large problem at hand in writing. One point however, should be mentioned in their favour. They are able to form short simple sentences of the S-O-V structure quite easily especially in Task I. Thus, as suggested by various studies done on syntax in written English, the hearing impaired do not write just a cantenation of words but these may be the parts of a sentence which should have been interlinked by the syntax markers. These syntax markers are not stressed upon while speaking and are usually absent while signing, hence their not being used in the writing of hearing impaired.

This small ability of the hearing impaired is little comfort beside their failures. Due to these other difficulties, their academic performances are affected. They do communicate quite effectively with the signs and gestures used, but these are effective only within the school. Outside, they are forced to use writing in order to express themselves, along with gestures. They are forced to limit themselves in communicating this way however, because of their poor writing skills.

Writing as a means of communication is different from speech and difficult because it involves making the visual and orthographic mode the main mode through which communication is based. The true sense of communication is audition, which is not available to them. Yet, some hearing impaired students have been known to acquire adequate writing skills for effective communication.

The reasons for the hearing impaired students of this study not being able to do as well as their normal hearing counterparts, are many, more than the basic reason given above. They could be the method of teaching adopted in the classroom which stresses on signs and gestures for communication and leaves writing only to answering examination questions. This in turn, is due to the rather lengthy syllabii given to the hearing impaired students. The teachers try to complete this syllabii, which is in reality meant for normal students, and are not left with sufficient time to teaching the rules of writing.

It would be interesting and important to identify all the major reasons for the above findings as these would help in providing better means for the hearing handicapped to communicate more effectively.

In the meanwhile however, it would be very beneficial to the handicapped as well as the people around them if certain steps were taken to combat this battle of lack of adequate writing skills. For one thing, the importance of writing to the hearing impaired must be recognised. Reasons for this has been given repeatedly by several researchers throughout the years. Given good writing skills, the handicapped are provided opportunities to come up mor successfully in life.

It is important to start with training in writing early in life, just as it is so with speech. Keeping in mind that writing is one of the most essential tool for the hearing impaired child to do well academically, and that the child must learn his language through modes other than hearing and proper speech, an early onset in reading and writing is important. Adequate exposure to written material provides the child with information about the finer points of the language, eg. syntax markers, and this is especially needed, considering that half of what is said usually goes unnoticed by him. Thus, writing must be started at early age. Sometimes, the child may even come out with fuller sentences while speaking, once he is using full sentences in writing.

Another essential commodity for building up good writing skills is that of special emphasis on the visual and orthographic mode being given for the hearing impaired. It is a known fact that even normals learn better with visual aids to supplement speech. In the case of the hearing impaired, visual aids are required as well, not as supplements, but as the main mode of information transfer. It is not at all advisable to rely on the students' abilities to lipread or comprehend signs and gestures.

Special attention must also be given to the specific parts and rules of writing. Lessons are required for the hearing impaired, with the sole interest of teaching them writing skills. For example, the use of syntax markers needs more help in implementation, so this should be dealt with in detail, in as many examples as is possible.

These recommendations may not give a 100% guarantee to good writing skills among the hearing impaired, but implementation of these will go a long way in enabling them to go well academically, get along well financially, and most of all, communicate more effectively with the majority of the population around.