

THE NEED TO DEVELOP DEAF FRIENDLY MATERIALS FOR BLACK ETHNIC MINORITY DEAF EXPERIENCING IDENTITY ISSUES

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Abstract: A challenge facing Black Ethnic Minority (BME) deaf people is the lack of cultural sensitivity or understanding towards their heritage and their Deaf identity. This raises several issues and demonstrates that groups do not really fully understand the profile of a BME deaf person and their background. This leads to many services being unable to fully accommodate the needs of BME deaf people. This paper builds on initial research into the make-up of the BME Deaf community, and seeks to gain a deeper understanding of this community with an aim to continue the research and development of appropriate visual material. The paper shares some of the initial findings and guidelines for creating appropriate Deaf friendly material for BME Deaf people.

Keywords: Accessibility, BME Deaf, guidelines, Deaf friendly

1. Introduction

BME deaf adults have less exposure to their own ethnic culture than that of their hearing counter-parts (Atkins, K., Rollings, 1998). Although ethnic and religious diversity is more evident, services still cannot fully accommodate the needs of minority ethnic populations within the Deaf community. Language choices such as BSL, English and a variety of home languages are complex and affected by a range of factors. Usually such decisions of language are affected by personal knowledge and preferences on the part of the parents (Ahmad et al, 1998).

Interpreters are not always familiar with Asian culture and working with the Asian community, therefore often unable to understand the full cultural implication of the BME deaf person and are unaware of minority ethnic customs, culture, rituals, foods, festivals (Ahmad et al, 1998). In addition, the education system within deaf schools or hearing impaired units can often give little attention to minority religions, languages and cultures, something pointed out by many young people (Ahmad et al, 1998). This lack of support provision has caused other social problems to develop, such as high levels of drug abuse in the deaf BME community (Chamba et al, 1998).

The lack of education within the Deaf community regarding cultural sensitivity means that many individuals have to turn to home and learn from family and friends. "Ethnic and religious identity was important for minority ethnic especially young, deaf people and many felt that the immersion in a "Deaf identity" had not afforded them access to these other, vital aspects of their heritage" (Ahmad et al, 1998). This paper aims to contribute a deeper understanding with regards to some of the issues that

BME deaf people face, by exploring the different types of media available to support such communities and by suggesting a set of guidelines on how to accommodate BME deaf peoples needs. In this paper we will discuss and outline the background and motivation of our work, our initial findings and how we aim to address these issues further.

2. Background and Motivation

The essential problem of deafness is not the lack of hearing, but isolation. Although most deaf children possess normal intelligence, their average reading age remains consistently and substantially below that of their hearing peers (Kyle et al, 1997). There is also evidence to show that young deaf people mature at a much slower rate than their hearing counterparts (Deafax, 2007). 95% of deaf children are born into hearing families few of whom sign fluently with their child (Deafax, 2007). This means that identity and socialisation depends largely on the schools they attend since Deaf identity is rarely developed through family-based socialisation. Within Asian families, deaf children have additional barriers that need to be assessed, demographic evidence estimates that there are approximately 97,000 Asian people (male and female) over 15 years old in the UK who suffer from deafness (Deafax, 2007). Communication problems are then often compounded by the use of additional languages within the home.

The purpose of this research will be to highlight issues within the BME Deaf communities, and to develop a deeper understanding of the backgrounds they come from, how to make the information deaf accessible and to examine the issues faced by these children and adults throughout their lives. Schools and learning establishments have not been able to make fully accessible software that describes culture and identity issues within different communities in London. Most of the services provided to date do not take into consideration the more complex cultural, religious and social needs of BME families with deaf children. Research has shown (Ahmad et al, 1998) that no services are able to provide or exist that are culturally and linguistically equipped to adequately and appropriately cater for children and young deaf and hard of hearing people from ethnic minorities in the areas addressed in this paper. For example, Asian communities tend to have denser populations in major cities and have greater amounts of activity and involvement, whereas smaller populations in rural areas are given less attention (Ahmad et al, 1998). The direct implication of such uneven distributions of minority ethnic populations, is that the smaller populations experience greater exclusion from mainstream society with services that are less aware and trained to deal with minority ethnic residents (Ahmad et al, 1998). Information access for minority ethnic populations is still a problem (Atkins, K., Rollings, 1998), however for the deaf there is an added challenge. Many BME families with deaf children are uncomfortable placing their child in the even smaller population of "BME deaf" as they feel uneasy with the notion of their child joining "mainstream deaf white culture", and not knowing about their own culture; a mother of a deaf child from an ethnic background comments: "I send my child to school and he comes back an Englishman" (Ahmad et al, 1998).

Interpreters are not always familiar with Asian culture and working with the Asian community, therefore they are often unable to understand the full cultural implication of the BME deaf person and are unaware of minority ethnic customs, culture, rituals, foods, festivals (Ahmad et al, 1998). Also the education system in schools (including schools for deaf children) has given very little attention to minority religions, languages and cultures, something pointed out by many young deaf people (Ahmad et al, 1998), this lack of provisions and support has resulted in the development of other social problems such as high levels of drug abuse in the deaf BME community (Edmonds et al, 2005). The lack of education in the Deaf community about cultural sensitivity leaves many individuals to turn to home and learn from family and friends (Ahmad et al, 1998).

3. Initial Research in London

We have found that many BME deaf individuals have multiple languages in their homes, spoken and signed. We will explore our initial findings in our research and explore how conventional methods to designing deaf friendly materials (Crombie-Smith, K.J.W. & Mootoo, A., 2007, Naqvi, S., 2006) need to be adapted to suit BME deaf community needs.

3.1 Methodology and Sample population

The research method is qualitative and the main focus was to look at the experience of young deaf BME language backgrounds in order to understand what the potential profile of BME deaf person's language may be and what we need to do to cater for these communities. Interviews were video recorded. The students would need a high level of assistance to complete questionnaires, thus a video recording of answers in the language of choice by the participants was the preferred method of data collection. The sample in this study are young BME students who are from different ethnic backgrounds, a random sample in May 2007 was chosen from those based at a college in Southwark (South East of London) for the preliminary study. It was not possible to fully eliminate interviewer bias but every measure possible was in place to reduce it. Interviews are always a subjective method of information collection and open to bias. The interviewer tried to maintain a non-directive approach in their questioning and emphasis was placed on the structure and tone of the questions. They refrained from offering their own opinions and any expressions of approval or disapproval to ensure that as far as possible the respondent was not lead and bias was limited.

Data used in this study primary data is supported by secondary information sources. These were from qualitative research, such as books, articles, journals and internet sources. The rationale for research choices was based on the literature review. I found that the most recent work including Ahmed et al (1998), Chamba et al (1998) and Shah (1995) are all qualitative in nature and the findings and conclusions are based upon detailed interviews with deaf children/adults, parents and services providers. The specific issues raised through interviewing deaf people were also mentioned. This research took a similar stance to Chamba (1998) and offered all the young people the choice to respond in their favoured or most comfortable language. It was not the researcher's role to discuss the language choice or the reasoning behind it.

3.2 Pilot run

Before the full interviews with the four Deaf people (subjects), mock interviews were undertaken. The mock interviews highlighted a few mistakes due to miscommunication with interviewees who had not understood the questions, and then did not respond with appropriate answers. This enabled the interviewer to review their questioning style and they realised that the questions had an English language structure and the first language of the interviewees was BSL or Home/Foreign signing styles. To solve this problem, the Interviewer translated the questions into BSL so the interviewees had a clearer understanding, adopting some of the approaches used by Naqvi 2006 (Naqvi, S., 2006). The interviewees were a sample of four deaf people and included one female and three males with an age range of between 16-26. The sample of deaf people was generated through contact in the Deaf community. The interviews were held in Southwark College in South East London.

3.3 Procedure

the interview started with the interviewer explaining to each of the interviewees exactly the reasons for the research project, and how it was being conducted. When contacted each person have been assured that it would be confidential and that they would not be identified. They each said that that was an issue that worried them but they were happy to contribute to the research. Bell (1997) confirms that subjects should be offered the condition and guarantee that all information will be treated in the strictest confidence. They were also informed that a video camera would be used throughout the interview, to enable the researchers to review the information in order to avoid missing any valuable information. They each agreed that this was acceptable.

The same interview questions were used for each participant. The questions had identified from the literature review. The interviews focus on issues such as language and family background. They all used BSL with additional languages. A period of discussion after each interview gave the opportunity to clarify any possible areas of misunderstanding.

3.4 Questionnaire and Findings

The following questions were used in the interview:

1. What is your nationality?
2. Where were you born?
3. Where were your parents born?
4. What is your ethnicity?
5. What is your religion?
6. Which culture/cultures do you follow?
7. What is your country of origin?
8. Which languages do you speak?
9. Which languages do you read?
10. Which languages do you sign?
11. What was your first language?
12. What is your preferred mode of communication?
13. Where you born deaf?
14. How do you feel about being deaf?
15. How did your community react to your Deafness?
16. Do you sign at home or speak?

3.4.1 J: J was born in the Phillipines and is now based in London Southwark, he is Catholic. When asked about his parents he said they also were born in the Phillipines but he was unsure about their faith. He uses British Sign Language(BSL) and reads Filipino, he learnt English and found it difficult so his main mode of communication is BSL. He commented that there is a Filipino sign language but he did not have access to it in the Phillipines as he was the only deaf person in school. When asked if he associated with Deaf culture, he responded with "Really I don't associate with Deaf Club, I have few deaf friends and meet them to socialise, sometimes I visited their house and have chat." When asked about his community he commented "Sometime it difficult to communicate with parent. My parent organise with community, I don't know what going on. I am unsure what is happening. Not sure what Philippines community is like." He mentioned his communication difficulty at home "We communicate by writing English because it easy and parent don't sign. Also difficult to understand each other by spoken English or Philippine language so we used written English." "My parent write English with me, that how we communicate. They know that I am deaf. My parent themselves speak their own language, I don't understand what they say but with me gesture and writing English. When I go Philippines, I don't know their language, so the people their used little English or gesture to communicate with me." J has not been taught a great deal about his culture except reading the language, and he cannot lip read as he is profoundly deaf and has never learnt how to. As a result he doesn't always understand his community, his experience with the Deaf community has been limited "I never met deaf people in Philippines until I arrived London. When I met deaf people, I wanted to find out what it was like, so I learn sign language and meet many deaf and in school aswell. I feel good and happy to be deaf." He is happier now with his communication needs finally being met appropriately but it seems that he has had to trade and lose his own cultural and community heritage as he is unable to understand what the community is about. These are common themes identified by researchers(Ahmad et al, 1998), and although there is an indication with this initial case study that J is happier now he is using BSL, he still has difficulty in having deep and meaningful communication in the home.

3.4.2 Ku: Ku born in Nigeria and now lives in London, he is a Christian but remarks. His parents were also born in Nigeria and they migrated here for Ku's education. I also met K's teacher, who made an interesting and insightful remark that the families move to London may be due to the fact that in Nigerian culture a great emphasis is placed on the first born son and his needs. Ku has a strong sense of identity when he comments "Yes I associate with Deaf culture, get involve in sport and meet lot of deaf people but my identity is not deaf. Why, because I follow my religion identity – Christian. I have my own deaf church group and discuss and get involved with them." He is able to use BSL and American Sign Language (ASL), he reads English but finds it difficult to understand and is learning it the moment. He said that he feels it is now too late for him to learn English properly because he is older. When asked about his community he commented "I don't understand African community, yes I mix and socialise with them, only half and other half with English community. Why I mix with African community because of my family. I don't understand African community, I need interpreter to translate for me to understand what is going on in the community. Yes I understand African's have their own language and culture, it is different from English." He also mentioned "I feel isolated, I face communication barrier with family, they all talk. I get fed up and go out and meet my deaf friend. I feel

unfair between me and family. I have three brother and one sister, they all lazy. I try to teach them sign language before but they are not bothered, so I leave them alone. I can't force them, it their choice." Ku has a strong Deaf identity "I am proud and happy that I am Deaf, it beautiful. I can do anything, sport, learning new thing and travel. Deaf can do it. I am happy to be Deaf. When I arrive to England, my language was ASL, I met deaf people who have ASL and they help me to learn BSL, now have two language.

3.4.3 Km: Km was born in the United Kingdom (UK), and lives in Derby, he is Muslim. His parents are from Pakistan and are also Muslim and they live in the family home. When asked about his association with Deaf culture he commented "Yes I associate with Deaf culture and community because we communicate BSL and understand each other." He is a BSL user and can read and write English, he can also lip read English but none of his cultural languages. When asked about his community and how and if it is possible that his community and cultures can mix he said: "I associate with Deaf, British and Pakistani community. Because with Pakistani community, I was born and raised in the Pakistani community, I spend my time with family, I learn their culture, eat Asian food, Dress Asian clothes, have same religion and same skin colour. With British community, I was born in England, live here and go school. I watch TV, eat English food, read British newspaper and dress English clothes. Deaf community is where I socialise with Deaf group and we communicate with our BSL language. It's a language that we understand each others with. The three communities cannot link together, they are separate. Why, I find it difficult absorb fully Pakistani culture because of their language barrier. I can adapt British culture because I live here. With Deaf it easier for me because we have the same language BSL and can understand each others. I have a Deaf identity but also Asian because I like to associated a lot with Pakistani Deaf people and share the same experience. So my identity is Deaf Pakistani." In his home they use a mixture of broken BSL, spoken English, home signing, Sign Supported English (SSE) and gesturing. When asked about how he felt about being deaf, he said he is "Proud to be deaf and proud to be deaf Pakistani".

3.4.4 S: S was born in Somalia and now lives in London, she is Muslim, and her parents were also born in Somalia. She lives with her mother and her father works abroad, they are also both? Muslim. When asked if she associates with Deaf culture she commented: "Yes I associate with deaf people in school and go out with deaf friend in Deaf club. I feel confident because we communicate in BSL and understand each others. I feel part of Deaf culture." She uses both BSL and SSE and can also read English. Her preferred method of communication is BSL. When asked if she mixes with her community she remarks "I mix with both Somalia and Deaf community but I understand more with Deaf community because of communication in BSL. It is clear to understand." At home there is little communications, and a lot of gesturing. When asked about her Deaf identity S commented "I have no problem being deaf, I am proud of deaf. Deaf is no different to hearing people, we are all the same."

3.5. Deaf Friendly Design for BME Deaf people

In our initial case studies we have found a very complex group of individuals with several factors affecting their language and educational development, from the lack of communication in the homes to difficulties in connecting with their own communities. From our initial understanding we have established some rules for inclusion and connection with BME Deaf people when designing Deaf friendly materials.

Conventional methods have shown a great understanding of visual communication such as images, the use of plain English and modification of the layout to make it less wordy and more visual (Crombie-Smith, K.J.W. & Mootoo, A. 2007). However BME deaf education is still significantly behind mainstream White deaf communities in London, so how can we provide alternative ways of improving educational/communication support for BME deaf people when accessing new information? Four initial recommendations are listed below, they have been compiled in discussion with Teachers of the Deaf who work with BME deaf individuals.

1. Sign Language: It is beneficial to use a sign language as it improves communication. However, as BME deaf people may be coming from different sign language backgrounds, e.g. BSL, ASL, SSE, Home signing or gesturing and have additional reading languages it may be better to start with a more gesture based signing, which most to all deaf people can

understand and as the levels of proficiency in the signing improves to then add more structured signing forms.

2. Written communication: conventionally when designing deaf-friendly materials, plain English is used, but if the individual is from a different written language background additional languages may need to be used. For example, by using key words in different languages showing an image and sign as well as the English spelling of the word. It will give a total rounded understanding of the word, but also provide links between languages and how to work between them in different countries.
3. Images: Use images that maybe relevant to BME deaf peoples backgrounds, something that associates to individual communities, this will provide a familiarity to the software/media application of education and will can help create a rapport with the system.
4. Individual: understand the particular background the individual is coming from, there are a wide range of BME deaf communities, by providing something too generic it may be possible to miss the communities totally. There is a need for additional support, such as understanding particular constraints within one community to another. For example Somalie muslims do not always like to have facial images in their homes and avoid seeing them or keeping them. Therefore when designing deaf-friendly material for this group faces or personified images would need to be avoided.

4. Conclusions

This paper outlines some of our initial research only, the project is still ongoing. However, we feel there is still a great deal to learn and are aiming not only to do further more indepth case studies with particular individuals, but also to look at the differences between foreign or British born deaf BME as this may affect language and communication needs. We believe it will also be insightful to work with the teachers of these students in order to gain some of their insight as the comments made with the K scenario, was solely because of the teacher works closely with the students family. Since these interviews we have met many other deaf individuals, some with lip reading skills in Urdu (language from Pakistan) and signing in BSL and wanting to access education. The needs of BME Deaf people are vast and we realize this is very much work in progress. We feel this is a positive start and are continuing to work closely with BME deaf people within London to understand how we can cater for their communication needs.

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