



# Reading comprehension ability level of deaf/hard of hearing students of Hossana Mekane Eyesus School for the Deaf

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## Abstract

For deaf and hard-of-hearing students, attainment of grade appropriate reading comprehension levels presents a specific challenge. Thus, the objective of this study was to assess the present reading comprehension level of each of the grades 5-12 and the average reading comprehension level of all the participant deaf students of Mekane Eyesus School for the Deaf. A case study research design was chosen because of its importance to illustrate and provide a unique example of real people in real situations. Twenty one deaf students were selected using purposive sampling technique. The data were collected through adapted diagnostic reading comprehension test called MICO. The result revealed that struggling readers, a reading comprehension score of below 60%, in each of the grade levels 5-12. Accordingly, the deaf students from grade 5 to grade 12 performed a mean score of 38.87 to 58.30 with standard deviation of 17.24 to 11.73 in the diagnostic reading comprehension test. In addition to this, the overall average score on the test revealed low reading comprehension with mean = 43.71 and Std. deviation = 14.68 which was revealed as struggling readers according to the parameter used in this study. Recommendations were forwarded based on the findings of the study.

**Keywords:** Reading Comprehension, deaf, hearing, school, student.

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## 1. Background

Reading comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading. It has been described as a complex process because, at the very least, it relies on the appropriate interactions among the writers and readers, the text and the context (Weaver, 2002). The National Reading Panel (2000) stated that "comprehension is critically important to the development of children's reading skills and therefore to the ability to obtain education. The UN Universal Declaration in 1948 on Human Rights declared providing education for all children. Consequently, all countries in the world are working towards it. However, this right of

education is not being entertained by higher number of people because of different reasons among different society in the world. From many other factors, disability is one of constraints which hold back many people from education. It was estimated that 10% of the world's children have physical, sensory, intellectual or mental health impairment. Almost 80% of these children with disability live in developing countries (Shiv, K., 2006). Hearing impairment, the key concern of this study, is one of the sensory impairments which are well recognized all over the world. Conceptually, it is the partial loss of the ability to hear (Hard of Hearing) or total loss of the ability to hear (Deafness) in one or both ears caused by damage to

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or malformation of one or more parts of the ear (Rafi, 2008).

For deaf and hard-of-hearing (d/hh) students, attainment of grade appropriate reading comprehension levels presents a specific challenge. Among these problematic issues deaf education and the factors that affect deaf students' learning place their special position. The field of deaf education has long struggled to develop literacy skills among deaf and hard of hearing (d/hh) children that are comparable to the literacy achievement of their hearing peers. Among professionals who work with d/hh children, including parents, teachers, medical professionals and speech pathologists, there is significant disagreement about whether Sign Language (SL) or spoken English is the most appropriate linguistic tool for supporting d/hh children as they develop their English language and literacy skills. There is even disagreement regarding the factors that affect literacy development in this population.

Recent reading research shows that several key factors impede a student's reading comprehension (Torgeson, 2002).

For instance, phonemic awareness (The ability to process the individual sounds of letters), vocabulary skills (During reading, students continually process words to create meaning, and without a strong vocabulary base, students will struggle to understand what they have read.), low prior knowledge (poor general knowledge), motivation (Reading comprehension is hindered when students lose interest and disengage from reading) and reading strategies (Strategies that good readers use while reading, such as predicting, inferring and summarizing).

Historically, educators and researchers have favored the use of either sign or spoken English in the classroom, focusing on audio logical skills, such as phonological awareness, phonics and English grammatical structures, presented either orally or manually through a signed representation of English. However many children struggled and often failed to obtain grade-appropriate reading skills under this methodology (Allen, 1986). In studies dating back to the early 20th century, large numbers of deaf/hh students have performed at reading levels much below their expected grade levels. Pintner and colleagues are credited with numerous studies which indicated that d/hh students, at the end of their secondary school education, had a median reading level of grade 4 (Pintner & Paterson, 1916, 1917). More than 90 years later, the median grade reading levels for deaf/hh high school graduates are still reported as being at the grade 4 reading level (Geers, Tobey, Moog, & Brenner, 2008; Marschark & Wauters, 2008; Rydberg, Gellerstedt, & Danermark, 2009).

These underachievement and lack of studies have been a source of immense concern for educators, researchers and students. A considerable portion of the research on deaf/hh students and reading comprehension has been conducted in North American, European countries and few African countries. Smaller replication studies have also been conducted in other countries to determine the universality of the challenges faced by deaf/hh students as well as to document how students perform on associated variables relate to their reading comprehension (Montreal & Hernandez, 2005; Wauters, Van Bon, & Tellings, 2006). In some instances, higher as well as lower reading comprehension levels have been reported.

Therefore, the present study intended to assess the present reading comprehension level of grade 5-12 students of Mekane Eyesus School for the Deaf: The case of Hossana Mekane Eyesus School for the Deaf. Accordingly the study aimed to achieve the following objectives.

1. To determine the present reading comprehension level of each of the grades 5-12 students of Mekane Eyesus School for the Deaf.
2. To determine the average reading comprehension level of all the participant deaf students of Mekane Eyesus School for the Deaf.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1. Study Design**

As the study deals with assessing reading comprehension level of deaf students a case study design was used. This design was chosen because of its importance to illustrate a more general principle (Nisbet and Watt, 1984:72), it is 'the study of an instance in action' (Adelman et al., 1980). The single instance is of a bounded system, for example a child, a clique, a class, a school, a community' (Adelman et al., 1980). It provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract theories or principles. Therefore, in the current study, attempted made to investigate the reading comprehension ability level of a unique students, deaf students. Furthermore, case studies strive to portray 'what it is like' to be in a particular situation, to catch the close up reality and 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973). Furthermore, the results from this kind of study design provide knowledge base for potential hypotheses that direct quasi-experimental and experimental studies (Creswell, 2003).

In line with this as there is a noticeable absence of extensive research on deaf population reading comprehension to determine appropriate baseline information, this study design would pave the way

for the establishment of the basis on which future experimental studies could be conducted.

## 2.2. Sources of data and population of the study

The source of data was deaf students of Hossana Mekane Eyesus School for the Deaf. According to the data from the school, there are 220 students from 'o' class up to grade 12 in the 2013 academic year. The students were taken as the population of the study. The populations of the study were therefore, 220 students.

## 2.3. Sample size

The sample of this study from the population of 220 deaf students enrolled in Mekane Eyesus School for the Deaf, Hossana was 21 deaf students who were attending their education from grade 5 to 12.

## 2.4. Sampling technique

The sampling technique which was employed for selecting the participants of this study was purposive sampling. Purposive sampling technique enables researchers handpick cases satisfactory to the specific needs of a study (Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion and Keith Morrison, 2000). Therefore, the main objective of the current study was assessing the present reading comprehension level of grade 5-12 students of Mekane Eyesus School for the Deaf. Grade levels 5 and above in which reading comprehension develops well were included in the study.

## 3. Data collection tool and procedures

### 3.1. Students' reading comprehension test

Reading Comprehension was assessed adapting a Standardized Diagnostic Reading Test, MICO (Milner, 1995). The MICO Diagnostic Reading Test was designed to assess the reading performance of students in grades 1 to 6 and with struggling readers at the secondary level. Besides, the MICO test is a highly secure and internationally administered test for assessing the reading comprehension level of students. The test consists of graded word lists and reading passages with four to eight questions accompanying each passage. It has substantial reliability estimates between 0.87 and 0.90 Solomon (1999). The result of the test was interpreted on the basis of three reading levels. According to Vivan F. (2017), there are three levels of reading comprehension categories: independent reader (a reading comprehension score of 90% and above), instructional reader (a reading comprehension score of 60% to 89%), and the frustrated reader (a struggling reader) (a reading comprehension score of below 60%). The estimated time for the test administration was 20 minutes.

In addition to this, before the adapted MICO test is administered, the readability level of the reading passages of it would have been tested using Gunning Fog Index to check whether the reading passages match the students' grade level or not.

In linguistics, the **Gunning fog index** is a readability test for English writing. The index estimates the years of formal education a person needs to understand the text on the first reading. For instance, a fog index of 12 requires the reading level of a high school graduate (around 18 years old). The fog index is commonly used to confirm that text can be read easily by the intended audience. Texts for a wide audience generally need a fog index less than 12. Texts requiring near-universal understanding generally need an index less than 8. The test was developed by Robert Gunning in 1952.

The Gunning fog index is calculated with the following algorithm:

1. Select a passage (such as one or more full paragraphs) of around 100 words. Do not omit any sentences;
2. Determine the average sentence length. (Divide the number of words by the number of sentences.);
3. Count the "complex" words consisting of three or more syllables. Do not include proper nouns, familiar jargon, or compound words. Do not include common suffixes (such as -es, -ed, or -ing) as a syllable;
4. Add the average sentence length and the percentage of complex words; and
5. Multiply the result by 0.4.

### 3.2. Procedures of data collection

The data collection procedure was first getting permission to collect data from the deaf students were guaranteed from the school director and then having got the necessary permission, the deaf students took reading comprehension test in the beginning of first semester of the academic year 2013.

### 3.3. Data analysis

The data that were collected from deaf students through the test were analyzed through descriptive statistics, frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation to determine the current reading level of each grade level. Statistical Package for Social Science software program (SPSS) version 20 was used to enter, clean and analyze the quantitative data.

## 4. Ethical issues

Ethical choices involve the fundamental rights, dignity and worth of all people Best and Kahn (2003, p. 47). Accordingly, to be cautions of the ethical considerations, first, the researcher requested a permission letter from the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature of A.A.U. Then, the researcher took the letter to Hossana Mekane Eyesus School for the Deaf and inform about the whole purpose of the research project. Hossana Mekane Eyesus School for the Deaf, Boarding

School Director (Institutional review board) Mr. Eyob Polamo, has granted the study to be undertaken in this boarding school. He has also given an oral consent on behalf of the deaf students and the school community in general to provide the research with necessary data stating that "this study is aimed at improving the academic achievement of deaf/ hard of hearing students so offer the study genuine data." Having got the necessary permission from the school director, the researcher asked a sign language interpreter to facilitate communication with deaf students. The consent of participants to participate in the study was obtained before the test was administered. The participants were told that their answers would remain anonymous and confidential.

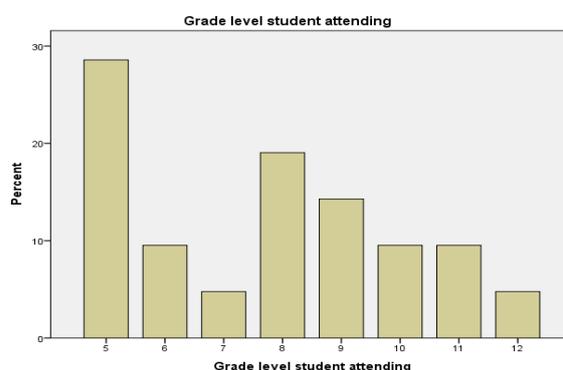
## 5. Results

Ethical choices involve the fundamental rights, dignity and worth of all people Best and Kahn (2003, p. 47). Accordingly, to be cautions of the ethical considerations, first, the researcher requested a permission letter from the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature of A.A.U. Then, the researcher took the letter to Hossana Mekane Eyesus School for the Deaf and inform about the whole purpose of the research project. Hossana Mekane Eyesus School for the Deaf, Boarding School Director (Institutional review board) Mr. Eyob Polamo, has granted the study to be undertaken in this boarding school. He has also given an oral consent on behalf of the deaf students and the school community in general to provide the research with necessary data stating that "this study is aimed at improving the academic achievement of deaf/ hard of hearing students so offer the study genuine data." Having got the necessary permission from the school director, the researcher asked a sign language interpreter to facilitate communication with deaf students. The consent of participants to participate in the study was obtained before the test was administered. The participants were told that their answers would remain anonymous and confidential.

**Table 1. Grade level the deaf students attending**

Grade	No. of students	Percent	Valid Percent
5	6	28.6	28.6
6	2	9.5	9.5
7	1	4.8	4.8
8	4	19.0	19.0
9	3	14.3	14.3
10	2	9.5	9.5
11	2	9.5	9.5
12	1	4.8	4.8
Total	21	100.0	100.0

In addition to the table, Figure 1 bar graph illustrates the grade level students attending, the number of students in each grade level and percentage output of the descriptive statistics so that the report could be more reader friendly.



**Figure 1. Graphic representation of the deaf students' grade level**

### Results from the Reading Comprehension Test Research Question 1: What is the present reading comprehension level of grade 5-12 students of Mekane Eyesus School for the Deaf?

The first research question examined the results of the adapted MICO reading comprehension test. The participants were given reading passages to read and respond to questions related to the passage. The total number of correct responses received had been scored and converted to percentiles. As the different grade levels test passages had different number of questions, percentiles were chosen to establish similar weight for all grade levels tests. Descriptive statistics, mean and std. deviation, were used to present the findings related to this research question. The results were interpreted based on Vivan F. (2017), there are three levels of reading comprehension categories: independent reader (a reading comprehension score of 90% and above), instructional reader (a reading comprehension score of 60% to 80%) and the frustrated reader (a struggling reader) (a reading comprehension score of below 60%). Accordingly, grade 5 deaf students 6 (28.6%) of the total participants were struggling readers with (M=38.87 and SD=17.248). Grade 6 deaf students 2 (9.5%) of the total participants scored the highest score from both educational statuses, primary and secondary, of the deaf participants, however; they were struggling readers with (M= 58.30 and SD=11.738). Grade 7 deaf student 1 (4.8%) of the total participants was also struggling reader with (M= 28.50 and SD = -). Grade 8 deaf student 4 (19.0 %) of the total participants were also struggling readers with (M= 37.50 and SD =14.434). Grade 9 deaf students 4 (14.3%) of the total participants were struggling readers with (M= 44.43 and SD = 9.642). Grade 10 deaf students 2 (9.5%) the total participants were

struggling readers with (M= 49.90 and SD = 10.041). Though grade 11 deaf students 2 (9.5%) the total participants scored the highest score from secondary school deaf participants, they were similarly struggling readers with (M= 56.9049 and SD = 19.940) and grade 12 deaf student 1 (4.8%)

the total participants were also struggling reader with (M= 42.80 and SD = -). Table 4.3 below presents the each grade levels reading comprehension test scores.

**Table 2. Reading comprehension test score**

Grades	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation	% of Total N
Grade 5	6	17	50	233	38.87	17.248	28.6%
Grade 6	2	50	67	117	58.30	11.738	9.5%
Grade 7	1	29	29	29	28.50	.	4.8%
Grade 8	4	25	50	150	37.50	14.434	19.0%
Grade 9	3	33	50	133	44.43	9.642	14.3%
Grade 10	2	43	57	100	49.90	10.041	9.5%
Grade 11	2	43	71	114	56.90	19.940	9.5%
Grade 12	1	43	43	43	42.80	.	4.8%

The result of each grade level achieved above has no difference from what has been revealed for decades in deaf population literacy development. Sullivan and Oakhill (2015) mention that “there has been relatively little progress in improving narrative comprehension in DHH readers despite decades of research, proving a need for further research into this topic. In addition to this the struggling readers from primary school to secondary school levels found in the current study are similar to the study by (ibid). They stated that the lack of literacy skills in students who are deaf or hard of hearing leads to their struggle in the secondary grades as well as throughout their college careers or in the post high school job market, unlike their hearing peers. However, this study assessed the reading comprehension ability of deaf students of grade 5 to 12.

On the other hand, the continued low reading level (struggling readers) found from primary school to secondary school level is a notable departure from what was expected because skill level in reading comprehension generally improves across grade level despite the noted challenges experienced by d/hh populations (Paul, 2009). However, the

findings of this study indicated that these students have not been able to achieve any noticeable progression in their reading comprehension skills.

**Research Question 2: What is the average reading comprehension level of all the participant deaf students of Mekane Eyesus School for the Deaf?**

The overall scores on the adapted MICO reading comprehension test for the grade levels 5 -12 ranged from minimum 17% to maximum 71% and **mean = 43.71 and Std. deviation = 14.686** for the total deaf participants. Thus, the result revealed overall low reading comprehension which were categorized as struggling readers according to the parameter used in this study, Vivan F. (2017), there are three levels of reading comprehension categories: independent reader (a reading comprehension score of 90% and above), instructional reader (a reading comprehension score of 60% to 80%) and the frustrated reader (a struggling reader) (a reading comprehension score of below 60%). Table 3 below presents the overall grade levels reading comprehension test results.

**Table 3. The average reading comprehension level of the whole deaf participants**

Grades	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation	% of Total N
5 - 12	21	17 %	71 %	918	43.71	14.686	100 %

The overall low reading comprehension which was categorized as struggling readers according to the

parameter used in this study, Vivan F. (2017) is similar to what has been declared on deaf children

reading skills by Staden (2013). "The reading skills of many deaf children lag several years behind those of hearing children, and there is a need for identifying reading difficulties and implementing effective reading support strategies in this population".

Moreover, this finding does speak to the overall low reading comprehension level of d/hh students, which is consistent with the existing literature on other deaf/hh populations worldwide (Luckner 2008; Mayberry, 2000; Spencer & Marschark, 2010).

### Limitations of the study

It would have been better and make the findings of this study become more reliable if the whole target populations had been incorporated into the study. Besides, since the school had been boarding and the participants of the study were special need students, different researchers had come to them to conduct researches and this would have made the participants bored to respond to different data gathering tools. Thus, the current study did not determine the reading level grade equivalent of deaf students by testing one grade level below reading tests to each grade level to find out the equivalent grade level they fit with. Instead the study determined the reading level of deaf students by giving their grade appropriate reading test to each of the grade levels.

### Summary of the findings

The focal point of this classroom research was assessing the reading comprehension of deaf students. The investigation revolved around two basic research questions. Assessing the present reading comprehension level of each of the grades 5-12 students of Mekane Eyesus School for the Deaf and assessing the average reading comprehension level of all the participant deaf students of Mekane Eyesus School for the Deaf.

For the collection of the necessary data, reading comprehension test was used. The test was adapted from a standardized diagnostic reading test, MICO (Milner, 1995). The data that were collected from deaf students through the test was analyzed through descriptive statistic such as frequency count in and percentage using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software program version 20.

The findings of the study indicated that each grade level deaf students' reading comprehension ability is fallen in the third type of reading comprehension level categories of Vivan F. (2017). There are three levels of reading comprehension categories: independent reader (a reading comprehension score of 90% and above), instructional reader (a reading comprehension score of 60% to 80%) and the frustrated reader (a struggling reader) (a

reading comprehension score of below 60%) Vivan F. (2017).Accordingly, grade 5 deaf students 6 (28.6%) of the total participants were struggling readers with (M=38.87 and SD=17.248). Grade 6 deaf students 2 (9.5%) of the total participants scored the highest score from both educational statuses, primary and secondary, of the deaf participants, however; they were struggling readers with (M= 58.30 and SD=11.738). Grade 7 deaf student 1 (4.8%) of the total participants was also struggling reader with (M= 28.50 and SD = -). Grade 8 deaf student 4 (19.0 %) of the total participants were also struggling readers with (M= 37.50 and SD =14.434). Grade 9 deaf students 4 (14.3%) of the total participants were struggling readers with (M= 44.43 and SD = 9.642). Grade 10 deaf students 2 (9.5%) the total participants were struggling readers with (M= 49.90 and SD = 10.041). Though grade 11 deaf students 2 (9.5%) the total participants scored the highest score from secondary school deaf participants, they were similarly struggling readers with (M= 56.9049 and SD = 19.940) and grade 12 deaf student 1 (4.8%) the total participants was also struggling reader with (M= 42.80 and SD = -).

On the other hand, though the overall scores on the adapted MICO reading comprehension test ranged from minimum 17% to maximum 71% for the participant deaf students, the **mean = 43.71 and Std. deviation = 14.686** for the total deaf participants confirmed low reading comprehension ability. Thus, the result revealed overall low reading comprehension which is categorized as struggling readers according to the parameter used in the study, Vivan F. (2017).

### 6. Conclusions

Based on the main findings synthesized above, this study is able to make the following conclusions regarding the reading comprehension of deaf students. The investigation revolved around two basic research questions. Assessing the present reading comprehension level of each of the grades 5-12 students of Mekane Eyesus School for the Deaf and assessing the average reading comprehension level of all the participant deaf students of Mekane Eyesus School for the Deaf. Consequently, this study found that frustrated reader (struggling reader) in each grade level deaf students' reading comprehension ability, which is the third type of reading comprehension level categories of Vivan F. (2017). Similarly, the study revealed that frustrated reader ( struggling reader) regarding the average reading comprehension level of all the participant deaf students of Mekane Eyesus School for the Deaf.

### Recommendations

The recommendations deal with measures that should be taken to improve deaf students' reading

comprehension ability levels in each of the grades 5 – 12 level and the average reading comprehension level of all the participant deaf students.

- This study revealed frustrated reader (struggling reader) in each grade level deaf students' reading comprehension ability. Therefore, teachers of the deaf learners should work to improve their students' reading comprehension competence through instructional scaffolding. Scaffolding reading comprehension includes effective strategy instruction through interesting texts and tasks, working on students' reading attitude and reading motivation and making adequate time to engage students in successful sustained reading (Huggins & Edwards 211:31).
- Similarly, the study revealed that frustrated reader (struggling reader) regarding the average reading comprehension level of all the participant deaf students of Mekane Eyesu School for the Deaf it is thus necessary that English language teachers in public schools develop their expertise and commitment to address these crucial issues in their reading instruction with the view to enabling students to develop independent reading repertoire.

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