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Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in adopting Malaysian Sign Language (MySL) as a Third Language among Typical Children and Adolescents

**Tengku Zetty Maztura Tengku Jamaluddin [1], Norshiha Saidin [2],
Emma Broome [3], Tengku Intan Baizura Tengku Jamaluddin [4]**

[1] Department of Medical Microbiology, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia
[2] Community Network Centre, Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia
[3] NIHR Nottingham Biomedical Research Centre: Hearing Sciences, Mental Health and Clinical Neurosciences, School of Medicine, Faculty of Medicine & Health Sciences, University of Nottingham, United Kingdom
[4] Faculty of Dentistry, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sungai Buloh Campus, Malaysia.

tengkuzetty@upm.edu.my, norsh240@uitm.edu.my, Emma.Broome1@nottingham.ac.uk, intanbaizura3124@uitm.edu.my
Tel: +603-61266175

Abstract
Children with early-onset, severe to profound deafness are more vulnerable to mental health problems than their hearing peers. Communication deprivation is a key risk factor in developmental delays. The key element of the Introduction to MySL pro forma is to create awareness and assess the willingness to adopt a new language among hearing individuals prior to embarking on inclusive education. This paper aims to explore youths and adolescents' prior experience and attitudes in communicating with persons with hearing difficulties (PWHD), MySL lesson expectations, adolescents' experience of the MySL pro forma, and their attitudes towards communicating with PWHD.

Keywords: inclusive communication; Malaysian Sign Language; third language; adolescents

1.0 Introduction
Communication deprivation is a key risk factor in developmental delays. Therefore, early psychological support provided to the child and their carer(s) is crucial to prevent mental health problems. The core content of this study draws upon education, sociology, psychology, and disability in relation to inclusive education in Malaysia. This conceptual framework was done prior to our study, which aims to respond to the need for linguistic and developmental diversity in Malaysia, in line with MEB 2013-2025 goals towards achieving academic excellence for the future generation while safeguarding the inclusion of vulnerable individuals and marginalised communities. Traversing through the 22nd century, we aim to nurture Inclusive Communication in the Community (ICC) amongst children and adolescents in order to bridge

the gap between hearing individuals with individuals who are Deaf (D), People with Hearing Loss (PHL), Speech or Learning disabilities and to subsequently, guide our Malaysian youngsters into intellectually and socially holistic individuals.

This study further supports the Incheon Strategy (2012) to "Make the Right Real" for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific. ESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific), United Nations advocates disability-inclusion to ensure that no one is left behind in reaching sustainable development goals, and the Incheon Strategy further charted a new course of action for the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities from 2013 till 2022.

The Introduction to MySL Pro Forma was created by content experts and insights provided by MySL instructors. Calibrated MySL instructors delivering the pro forma in this study were 66.67% DPHL. A total of 6 experts in the teaching of Malaysian sign language have set the theme title and subtitle in MySL Pro Forma. Here is a theme in MySL Pro forma. Theme 1 is the introductory topic of deaf culture, while theme 2 is basic sign language learning, and theme 3 is sign language learning in schools. For theme 1, deaf culture is to cover aspects of the life of the deaf and how to communicate with the deaf. Whereas theme 2 includes learning such as letters, numbers, and word groups. Next for theme 3 is the learning of school sign language, which covers aspects of buildings and equipment in schools as well as communication in schools. The pro forma also included teaching children and adolescents Malaysia's national anthem, NegaraKu, and culturally relevant sub-topics where students learn names of States in Malaysia in MySL. In addition, this study was embarked to assess the adoption of Malaysian Sign Language (MySL)/Bahasa Isyarat Malaysia (BIM) as a third language in public schools in Malaysia.

2.0 Objectives
This paper aims to investigate children and adolescents' prior experience and attitudes in communicating with persons with hearing difficulties (PWHD), MySL lesson expectations, their experience of the Introduction to MySL Pro Forma, and their attitudes towards communicating with PWHD.

3.0 Literature Review

3.1 Sign Language Background in Malaysia
Sign language is one of the forms of communication used by the Deaf. The hearing impairment faced by the deaf causes them to be unable to speak well and use sign language as their primary language. Sign language has its uniqueness: each hand symbol gives a meaning and situation (Wilbur, 2013). In addition, body language and facial expressions become the attraction and intonation in the use of sign language (Wilbur, 2013). This is supported by, Haizan & Nazira (2017); sign language is non-verbal communication in conveying a message or information to others without using speech or spoken words, instead of using hand movements, body language, and facial expressions.

The sign language used for the deaf community in Malaysia is Malaysian Sign Language (MySL), also known as Bahasa Isyarat Malaysia (BIM). The formation of MySL was based on the practices and culture practiced by the deaf community in Malaysia. The deaf community in Malaysia has widely used MySL, and even in special education schools, hearing students also use MySL as the language of communication in schools (Rashid et al., 2021). Linguists recommend MySL because it meets the characteristics of a language. Yusoff and Rabiaah (2004) stated that MySL had fulfilled the characteristics of a language in linguistic aspects such as having a system, symbolism, arbitrary nature, owned, inherited, and able to express everything. Therefore, BIM cannot be equated with general gestures or body language used daily.

Sign language also has its own grammar that is different from the spoken language in a country. It is not universal in nature, and this statement is in stark contrast to the widespread general notion that this language is the same everywhere. Wherever the deaf community is, sign language will inevitably flourish. This has resulted in the use of sign language being widely used around the world according to the cultural core of the local deaf community.

Yusoff and Rabiaah (2004) reported the acquisition of the Malay Language among deaf children from a linguistic perspective. Bahasa Malaysia (Malay language) is important to both educators and learners as it is a compulsory syllabus for Malaysian students, especially for enrolment in the Malaysian public services. This predicament for Malaysian educators is to ensure their students pass the national examinations. To improve Malay language proficiency among deaf students, (Manually Coded Malay Language MCML/Kod Tangan Bahasa Melayu KTBM) was formed by the Ministry of Education in 1985. However, KTBM is not a language but manually coded signing to help deaf students improve their Malay language. Students use KTBM according to the structure and grammatical sentences of the Malay language.

In 2008, the Malaysian Sign Language (MySL) / Bahasa Isyarat Malaysia (BIM) was recognised as the official sign language in Malaysia with 60, 000 MySL users (2013 Census). As an official language, it is used in official broadcasts and announcements. However, language acquisition among deaf and PWHD in Malaysia ranges widely as it depends on available resources such as inclusive pre-schools or private centres educating the deaf community, family financial resources, and support.

3.1.1 The Use of Sign Language in Inclusive Education

Inclusive Education is an education given to students with special needs to study with typical students in the same class and taught by regular teachers (Cologon et al., 2018). In addition, inclusive education involves students with special needs in regular classes where appropriate assistance is provided to them to pursue teaching and learning with peers (Constantinou et al., 2020). Based on the Salamanca Convention (1994), a mutual agreement has been reached on the success of inclusive education. This has shown that all students, regardless of typical or special circumstances, should be accepted and have the support of peers, teachers, and school administrators by providing equal educational facilities irrespective of race, background, socio-cultural, economic status, and disability.

The main goal in implementing inclusive education is that students with special needs are actively involved in various social and academic activities in schools and communities together. The implementation of inclusive education also gives the right to all students to get a proper education. However, Zalizan (2009) stated that inclusive education in Malaysia still practices the concept of integration compared to the actual inclusive concept. This is also supported by Lee (2010), who stated that the current education system in Malaysia can not meet the needs of special students because the mainstream class is still not ready to adapt to the situation. Therefore, efforts to include students with special needs in mainstream classes in Malaysia still require substantial support and high commitment from various parties.

Based on the statement of UNESCO (1994), the challenge to be faced in the national education system is the ability to meet the needs of students at every level. If the needs cannot be met, there is a possibility of impacting students with special needs who will feel frustration, academic failure, a curriculum that cannot be fully utilised, and future opportunities in society. Therefore, emphasizing the importance of planning in giving awareness to the school community on the attendance of students with special needs is essential in ensuring that there are no gaps. In line with the Ministry of Education Malaysia's (MOE) aspirations to integrate special needs students with mainstream students in regular schools (Snoddon, 2017; Kinsman, 2014). Therefore, this integration program can allow students with special needs to enjoy all the opportunities and learning as felt, experienced, and enjoyed by their normal peers without disabilities in the classroom in a regular school. Furthermore, in order to reduce the communication gap that occurs, sign language learning needs to be implemented for mainstream students and communities in schools (Snoddon, 2017; Kinsman, 2014).

3.2 Instrument Tool for Innovative Education Pro Forma: A Mixed-Mode Research Framework

A conundrum regarding the most appropriate instrument tools was faced by researchers in this study as previous studies revealed that qualitative instrument tools such as Focus Group Discussion (FGD) would allow researchers to solicit children and adolescents' attitudes, perceptions, knowledge, and experiences as well as their differences on their experiences, opinions during a semi-structured "open" discussion. Therefore, researchers added a qualitative tool to support the recently developed Learning Malaysian Sign Language Questionnaire (L-MySL-Q) that was utilised in this study.

3.2.1 Target Group: Middle Childhood to Adolescents.

The general aim of the MySL study conducted is to recommend MySL as a third language at public schools in Malaysia. In general, both Primary (7 till 12 years old) and Secondary (13 till 17 years old) public schools in Malaysia provide a third language option for their pupils. The most common third languages in Malaysian Primary schools include Mandarin, Tamil, and Arabic. A wider range of languages is offered at Secondary school, which includes Japanese, French, German, Korean, besides the three common third languages. Target groups were selected based on the age groups' cognitive capacity and the end goals of the MySL study.

Table 1.0 Tabulated Differences in Cognitive Capacity among Age Groups

AGE GROUPS	Early Childhood	Middle Childhood	Adolescence
AGE RANGE	< 6 years	7 – 12 years old	12 – 16 years old
COGNITIVE ATTRIBUTES	DETAILED DESCRIPTION		
COG 1: FOCUS & ATTENTION SPAN	Wide range of Attention Spans 0-1: Fleeting Attention 1-2: Rigid Attention 2-3: Single-Channelled Attention 3-4: Focusing Attention		

	5-6: Two-Channelled Attention		
COG 2: THINKING PATTERNS	Think **dichotomously** (mostly All-or-Nothing; Black-or-White thinking patterns)	Thinking aloud is common as children have a rich and vivid imagination. 7 – 12: Unable to cope with **ambiguity** at all and may not handle **negations** well.	**Abstraction**: After early adolescence between 15 till 16 years of age, an adolescent's processing speed is comparable to adults. 12 – 17: Able to formulate complex ideas, thoughts about the future, and think about more abstract concepts. 12 – 16: May still experience major issues with **ambiguity**.
COG 3: LANGUAGE	Limited vocabulary as less exposure and only expose to language at home/day care/school environment	Less than 9 years will be able to "manage" 2, 600 words 9 years old: 5,000 words	Adult: 10, 000 words
COG 4: MEMORY	Limited social experience especially during the COVID-19 Pandemic (March 2020 till present)	Approximately around the age of 8 years, a child can start **recalling** and **expressing** personal experiences that they think could be relevant to feed into the conversation. The capacity and constructive process of a child's memory is **not fully grown** before 11 years.	More than 11 years old: Similar capacity and constructive process to adults.
COG 5: SOCIAL DESIRABILITY BIAS & SENSITIVITY		7 – 10: Extremely sensitive to slightest suggestion. Fear of saying something incorrect or foolish, especially in an educational environment or similar to it. Some may remain impressionable by adults and elders.	10 – 12: Social desire and sensitivity become more of an issue. 11 – 13: Approval seeking and peer compliance peaks. 12 – 17: Tend to avoid negative questions and may have pressure to conform to peers.

(Adapted from International Federation of Terre des Hommes (TDHIF), Guide for conducting FGDs with children, April 2019).

3.3 Qualitative Instrument Tool: Focus Group Discussions (FGD)

The advantages of qualitative methods for exploratory research include the usage of open-ended questions and further probing questions to encourage and provide subjects to respond in their own words, not restricted by a pre-determined scale. Open-ended questions may result in meaningful and explanatory responses from subjects but may also deliver unanticipated responses by the researcher. These responses allow researchers the flexibility to probe initial responses from subjects, and researchers are able to engage more with subjects according to their personalities and identities**.**

4.0 Face Validation of FGD for Introduction to MySL Pro Forma

4.1 Development of FGD Protocol

The FGD Protocol, including FGD questions, was developed by two researchers and underwent content validation by three content experts; one education expert for the special needs community, one health informatics expert, and one clinical researcher. FGD questions and the flow of questions were reviewed and discussed among all researchers to avoid ambiguous answers during the FGD. The protocol was amended according to expert feedback and used in the validation. In addition, we planned to conduct Focus Group Discussions with children and adolescents before and after their participation in the "Introduction to MySL" lesson.

Purposive sampling was selected due to the restrictions of the current pandemic. Pre-MySL lesson FGD explored prior experience communicating with persons with hearing difficulties (PWHD), MySL interest in learning MySL, and their expectations of the MySL lesson. The Post-MySL lesson FGD focused on what they felt about MySL and their feelings on communicating with PWHD after learning MySL. In both FGDs, a scenario was given to illicit their current attitudes, feelings, and thoughts on communicating with PWHD. The table below outlines the FGD Protocol, including Recording Sheets and a Guide for facilitators. Section 0 and 1 were repeated post-intervention, especially if new facilitators were assigned to respective groups. Participants remained in their designated groups before and after the MySL lesson.

Table 2.0 Introduction to MySL Pro Forma: FGD Protocol Outline

FGD PART 1:	PRE-MySL LESSON
SECTION 0	Welcoming Session, Introduction to FGD and Explanation of the FGD. Seating arrangements recorded on Pre-MySL EGD sheet.
SECTION 1	Facilitators inquire demographic background for data analysis purposes.
SECTION 2	Facilitators inquire whether participants had any previous experience with PWHD.
SECTION 3	Facilitators inquire participants' interest in learning MySL.
SECTION 4	Facilitators prompt thoughts and feelings from the provided scenario. Questions aim to bring out the awareness of the communication challenges of PWHD.
SECTION 5	Facilitators initiate remarks or inputs from participants before wrapping up the session.
SECTION 6	Facilitators conclude the session by thanking participants, and reminding them that the discussion should be kept confidential and all recordings will be anonymised.
INTERVENTION	MySL LESSON
FGD PART 2:	POST-MySL LESSON
SECTION 0	Welcoming Session, Introduction to FGD and Explanation of the FGD. Seating arrangements recorded on Post-MySL FGD sheet.
SECTION 1	Facilitators inquire demographic background for data analysis purposes.
SECTION 2	Facilitators inquire feedback regarding MySL and communication with PWHD post-intervention.
SECTION 3	Facilitators inquire participants' MySL learning experiences.
SECTION 4	
SECTION 5	Similar to Pre-MySL FGD
SECTION 6	
	END OF FGD

4.2 Flexibility in Subjects' Responses

As the target group involved subjects from middle childhood and adolescence groups, the execution of the FGD was made more flexible to attain their interest and responses. Mode of responses was obtained via verbal response; written response: Sticky Notes and writing on the whiteboard; and action response: voting during a poll or YES/NO question asked by facilitators. All these modes were prepared according to participants' cognitive attributes, and facilitators were calibrated on initiating and encouraging responses from younger participants as stated in the FGD Protocol.

4.3 Face Validation of Introduction to MySL FGD

Face validity is the degree to which a measure appears to be related to a specific construct in the judgement of non-experts such as educators and students in this study. In other words, face validity refers to researchers' subjective assessments of the presentation and relevance of the measurement tool as to whether the items in the instrument appear to be relevant, reasonable, unambiguous, and clear. Face validation of the instrument tool was conducted in collaboration with Research Group: Sustaining Quality of Life, Universiti Teknologi MARA. In this study, the purpose of face validation was to test the reliability and design, including order of questions, grammar, an appropriate video shown, and time spent responding to all FGD Protocol sections. 15 children and adolescents ranging from 8 to 17 years old participated in this session. The study included children and adolescents who met the inclusion and exclusion criteria and whose parents agreed to participate in the study. Children and adolescents with severe mental illness, physical disability, chronic illnesses, and confirmed COVID-19 infection were excluded from the study. Results obtained from the face validation were used to improve the Focus Group Discussion Protocol to an optimal level for subjects to answer in the second phase of the research.

During the FGD, subjects were divided into two groups according to age groups; middle childhood and adolescents, and two calibrated researchers facilitated each group. One researcher was assigned to conduct the FGD as per protocol, while one researcher acted as the scribe for documenting verbal responses. Voice recording and video recording were also done based on assent from participants and guardians. Notably, one subject declined assent to share voice, photos, or videos taken during the FGD; however, they agreed to write feedback using sticky notes and whiteboard.

4.4 Ethics

The Education Planning And Research Division, Ministry of Education approved this study [KPM.600-3/2/3-eras(7806)]. Initially, parents or legal guardians who verbally consented to their children's participation in the study received participant information sheets containing all pertinent details regarding the aim and course of the study, possible inconveniences related to participation, and information regarding the possibility of withdrawal at will. Parents signed an informed participation consent form prepared according to the Ethical Commission's guidelines on the day of the study. All personal information related to the study was encrypted by registration number and securely stored in a stand-alone, password-secured computer.

5.0 Findings

53.33% (n=8) of face validation respondents were below 12 years old, with most respondents being female (n=11, 73.33%). The respondents were equally divided in familiarity in one language, bilingual and trilingual. Two-thirds (n=10, 66.67%) of respondents were comfortable in Malay and English languages. Other languages include Mandarin and Japanese. Only one respondent had a previous encounter with PWHD at her school. There were respondents (n=3, 20%) with special classes at their schools; however, they did not experience any encounters with PWHD.

There were slight differences in the way both groups responded. Younger subjects responded actively during the entire FGD, while the older group positively gave constructive feedback using multiple ways, including non-verbal (sticky notes). The east cultural embodiment among most Malaysian children and adolescents portrayed a "mellowed-down" way of voicing out their opinions. Hence, sticky notes and whiteboards were frequently used in older participants' feedback. Findings of the conducted pilot FGD are tabulated in the table below.

Table 3.0 Face Validation Response of FGD

AGE GROUPS	Middle Childhood	Adolescence
AGE RANGE	8 – 12 years old	12 – 16 years old
PRE-LESSON FGD	Majority of the subjects preferred to answer via Sticky Notes (pen and paper).	
	Responded bilingually in Bahasa Malaysia and English.	
	Questions were asked bilingually in Bahasa Malaysia and English, utilising casual language with simple grammar and vocabulary.	

	Responded verbally when questions were asked directly to subjects.	Responded verbally when encouraged or when questions were asked directly to subjects.
	The video clearly depicts how the deaf community reacted, was undermined, and misunderstood in a typical environment. Respondents suggested facilitators show a video portraying the local Malaysian environment for subjects to relate better and to illicit responses based on local culture and norms.	
POST-LESSON FGD	Preferred to respond verbally as per sharing a story of their experiences.	Preferred to answer via Sticky Notes or writing it down on the whiteboard.
	Excitement and enjoyment while learning MySL portrayed their responses.	More affluent and explanatory responses than pre-intervention.
	Claims that enjoyable learning MySL but lots of gestures to practice and remember.	

6.0 Future work
As FGDs analysis is made for future decision making, future studies assessing the MySL FGD Pro forma should include a wide range of children representing various backgrounds in Malaysia. Therefore, the data obtained from the FGDs will be able to facilitate the design of MySL as a third language programme and initiate MySL programmes among typical school children in Malaysia.

7.0 Conclusion
The majority of the participants did not know how to communicate with a PWHD and felt unsure of strategies that could be implemented. However, participants appeared eager to learn MySL. They reported that the lesson was fun, exciting, and enjoyable. Even after only one lesson, they were able to sign what was taught by the MySL instructors. Participants also reported that they felt more confident in communicating with PWHD in the future. However, there are a lot of gestures to remember and they realised that continuous practice would make them remember how to create gestures and communication using MySL.

A majority of the respondents wanted to learn more MySL. Researchers are grateful and overwhelmed by how the "Introduction to MySL" lesson initiated a positive attitude toward learning MySL and increased confidence to communicate with PWHD among the respondents. These findings strongly show that by introducing MySL as an alternative language officially at Malaysian schools, we can strengthen social protection against poverty, household consumption, and inequality.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study
Acquisition of language differs among age groups and socio-economic levels. Therefore, this study contributes to an Innovative Education Pro Forma and sets the scene for inclusive communication in Malaysia, especially in the education field, hospital-setting, banks, and other places which entail communication. In addition, the findings of this study support social psychology not only for the PWHD but also for

parents and carer(s).

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