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Sign Language Interpreting in Cameroon: Challenges and Pathways Toward Professionalisation

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ABSTRACT: Sign language interpreting plays a pivotal role in ensuring communication accessibility and promoting the social inclusion of persons with hearing impairment. Although the demand for interpreting services in Cameroon has increased considerably due to the expansion of inclusive education, disability rights advocacy, and greater participation of Deaf persons in public life, the profession remains at an emerging stage of development. This study examines the current state of sign language interpreting in Cameroon and analyses ongoing efforts toward its professionalization. Guided by Greenwood's Professionalization Theory and Social Inclusion Theory, the study adopted a qualitative research design based on documentary research and contextual analysis. Data were obtained from peer-reviewed literature, books, government policy documents, legal instruments, international conventions, institutional reports, and publications on Deaf studies and interpreter education. Thematic content analysis generated three major themes, namely barriers to professionalization, emerging professionalization initiatives, and professionalization as a strategy for inclusive communication and disability inclusion. The findings reveal that although Cameroon has made significant progress through disability legislation, advocacy initiatives, and increasing public awareness, sign language interpreting continues to face challenges including inadequate interpreter-training programmes, absence of national certification and licensing systems, weak professional regulation, shortage of qualified interpreters, limited institutional recognition, and poor working conditions. The study argues that professionalizing sign language interpreting requires structured university programmes, nationally recognized competency standards, certification mechanisms, professional associations, ethical regulation, continuous professional development, and stronger governmental commitment. Consequently, a strategic roadmap for institutionalizing sign language interpreting as a certified university programme in Cameroon is proposed. The study concludes that strengthening interpreter education and professional recognition is fundamental to improving communication accessibility, protecting the linguistic rights of the Deaf community, and advancing inclusive education, social justice, and sustainable national development.

KEYWORDS: Sign Language Interpreting, Professionalisation, Deaf Community, Inclusive Communication, Sign Language Interpreter Training, Disability Inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Communication is universally recognized as a fundamental human right and an indispensable prerequisite for education, healthcare, employment, justice, governance, and social participation. For persons with hearing impairment, effective communication depends largely on the availability of accessible communication modalities, particularly sign language and qualified sign language interpreters. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) recognizes sign languages as legitimate languages and obliges States Parties to ensure the provision of professional sign language interpreters in public services to facilitate equal participation by Deaf persons (United Nations, 2006). Similarly, the World Health Organization (2021) emphasizes that communication accessibility is central to achieving health equity, educational inclusion, and social participation for persons with hearing loss.

Sign language is not merely an alternative means of communication but a complete natural language with its own linguistic structure, grammar, syntax, and cultural significance (Baker-Shenk & Cokely, 1980; Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996). Within Deaf communities, sign language embodies identity, culture, and social cohesion. Consequently, sign language interpreting extends beyond literal language translation to include cultural mediation, contextual adaptation, and the accurate transfer of meaning between Deaf and hearing interlocutors (Pöchhacker, 2004). Professional interpreters therefore play a critical role in ensuring equitable access to information and services while safeguarding the linguistic rights of Deaf individuals.

Globally, sign language interpreting has undergone remarkable professional development over the past four decades. In many countries, interpreting has evolved into a recognized profession supported by university degree programmes, certification systems, professional associations, ethical codes, and continuing professional development. Organizations such as the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) in the United States, the National Registers of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD) in the United Kingdom, and similar professional bodies in Australia, Canada, and several European countries have contributed significantly to standardizing interpreter education and

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practice. These developments have enhanced service quality, strengthened professional accountability, and improved communication accessibility for Deaf communities (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007; Napier, 2002).

In contrast, many low- and middle-income countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, continue to experience substantial shortages of professionally trained sign language interpreters. Interpreter education remains limited, certification systems are either weak or non-existent, and interpreting services are often provided by volunteers, teachers, religious leaders, or family members with varying levels of competence. Consequently, many Deaf persons continue to encounter communication barriers when accessing education, healthcare, judicial services, employment opportunities, and civic participation. These disparities highlight persistent inequalities in the realization of disability rights despite increasing international commitments to inclusive development (World Health Organization, 2021).

Cameroon reflects many of these broader African realities. Over the past two decades, the country has made notable progress in promoting disability inclusion through legislative reforms and international commitments. The enactment of Law No. 2010/002 of 13 April 2010 relating to the protection and promotion of persons with disabilities, together with its implementing Decree No. 2018/6233/PM, demonstrates the government's commitment to improving accessibility and equal opportunities for persons with disabilities. Furthermore, Cameroon's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2014 strengthened its obligation to provide accessible communication and inclusive services for persons with hearing impairment (Republic of Cameroon, 2010; Republic of Cameroon, 2018; United Nations, 2006).

Despite these policy advances, the practical implementation of communication accessibility remains inadequate. Sign language interpreting services are still unavailable in many public institutions, including schools, universities, hospitals, courts, police stations, local councils, and other government offices. Where interpreting services exist, they are frequently provided on an ad hoc basis by individuals who have acquired signing skills informally through interaction with Deaf communities, churches, or voluntary organizations rather than through structured professional training. Consequently, the quality, consistency, and ethical standards of interpreting services vary considerably across contexts.

The authors' observations, drawn from years of engagement in special education, Deaf education, sign language instruction, and interpreter development in Cameroon, indicate that the demand for qualified sign language interpreters has increased considerably in recent years. This growing demand is particularly evident in inclusive schools, higher education institutions, healthcare facilities, religious organizations, media broadcasts, conferences, and community outreach programmes. It is increasingly common for institutions organizing public events to seek sign language interpreters in order to enhance accessibility for Deaf participants. However, the limited availability of trained interpreters frequently results in overreliance on a small number of practitioners, many of whom work under challenging conditions characterized by inadequate remuneration, absence of professional regulation, and limited opportunities for continuing professional development. These contextual observations underscore the urgent need for systematic investment in interpreter education and professionalization.

Another notable concern is the limited societal understanding of the role of sign language interpreters. In many settings, interpreters continue to be perceived simply as volunteers or communication assistants rather than highly skilled language professionals. Such misconceptions often undermine professional recognition, restrict employment opportunities, and weaken institutional commitment to establishing permanent interpreting services. At the same time, Deaf persons continue to experience communication barriers that limit meaningful participation in education, healthcare, justice, governance, and economic activities, contrary to the principles of inclusive development and equal opportunity advocated by international human rights instruments.

Professionalisation provides a useful framework for addressing these challenges. According to Greenwood (1957) and Wilensky (1964), occupations become professions through the establishment of specialized knowledge, formal education, ethical standards, certification mechanisms, professional associations, and legal recognition. Applying these principles to sign language interpreting implies moving beyond informal volunteer practice toward a structured profession characterized by nationally recognized qualifications, standardized competencies, ethical accountability, and institutional regulation. Such transformation would not only improve the quality of interpreting services but also strengthen communication accessibility and protect the linguistic and human rights of persons with hearing impairment.

Although studies have examined disability inclusion and special education in Cameroon, relatively little scholarly attention has been devoted specifically to the professionalisation of sign language interpreting as an emerging profession. Much of the available literature focuses on inclusive education, disability policy, or general communication accessibility, leaving important questions regarding interpreter education, professional regulation, certification, ethical practice, and workforce development insufficiently explored. This paper therefore seeks to bridge this gap by examining the current status of sign language interpreting in Cameroon, analysing existing efforts toward its professionalization, identifying persistent challenges, and proposing practical strategies for establishing sign language interpreting as a fully recognized profession capable of promoting accessibility, equity, and inclusive national development.

The main objective of this study is to examine sign language interpreting in Cameroon and assess ongoing efforts toward its professionalisation. Specifically, after exploring the historical development of sign language interpreting in Cameroon, and examining the current status of sign language interpreting services in the country, the study seeks to identify the major challenges affecting the professionalisation of sign language interpreting, analyse the role of institutions, professional associations, and policy frameworks in promoting interpreter professionalism, and propose practical recommendations for strengthening sign language interpreting as a recognized profession in Cameroon.

Operationalisation of Key Concepts

The key concepts which underpin this research are defined in the sections below:

Sign Language

Sign language refers to a natural visual-gestural language used primarily by Deaf communities for communication and social interaction. Unlike manually coded systems of spoken languages, sign languages possess independent grammatical structures, syntax, morphology, and semantic systems. They are complete languages capable of expressing abstract, concrete, emotional, and intellectual concepts (Baker-Shenk & Cokely, 1980). Sign language is not universal; different countries and regions possess different sign languages shaped by culture, history, and community

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interaction. Within the Deaf community, sign language also serves as a marker of cultural identity and social belonging. Scholars such as Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan (1996) emphasize that sign language is central to Deaf culture and contributes significantly to the social and psychological development of Deaf individuals.

Sign Language Interpreting

Sign language interpreting is the professional process of facilitating communication between Deaf and hearing individuals by accurately and impartially transferring meaning between a signed language and a spoken language. Unlike translation, which deals primarily with written texts, interpreting involves the real-time rendering of messages while preserving the speaker's intended meaning, tone, register, and cultural nuances (Pöchhacker, 2004). The interpreter therefore serves as a linguistic and cultural mediator, ensuring that communication flows effectively between individuals who do not share the same language modality.

Sign language interpreting extends beyond the literal conversion of words or signs. It requires the interpreter to analyse discourse, understand contextual meaning, recognize cultural differences, and convey messages in a manner that is linguistically and culturally appropriate. This process demands high levels of proficiency in both the signed and spoken languages, excellent cognitive processing skills, rapid decision-making, and the ability to maintain fidelity to the original message without adding, omitting, or distorting information (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007).

Professional sign language interpreting can occur in various forms depending on the communication context. These include simultaneous interpreting, where the message is rendered almost immediately as it is produced; consecutive interpreting, where the interpreter waits for the speaker to pause before conveying the message; and relay interpreting, in which communication is facilitated through another interpreter when direct interpretation is not possible. Interpreting may also involve specialized domains such as educational, medical, legal, conference, religious, community, and media interpreting, each of which requires additional knowledge, vocabulary, and contextual competence.

Beyond linguistic competence, professional sign language interpreters are expected to uphold internationally recognized ethical principles, including confidentiality, impartiality, accuracy, professionalism, integrity, and respect for the autonomy and linguistic rights of Deaf persons. Ethical practice also requires interpreters to recognize the limits of their competence, avoid conflicts of interest, engage in continuous professional development, and maintain appropriate professional boundaries. Many interpreter associations worldwide, including the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), regard adherence to a code of professional conduct as a defining characteristic of professional interpreting practice (RID, 2010).

Within the context of inclusive education and disability rights, sign language interpreting serves as an essential accessibility service that enables persons with hearing impairment to participate fully in education, healthcare, employment, judicial proceedings, public administration, religious activities, and community life. It contributes significantly to the realization of the communication rights guaranteed under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). In Cameroon, where sign language interpreting is still an emerging profession, strengthening interpreter education, professional standards, and certification mechanisms remains fundamental to improving communication accessibility and promoting the full social inclusion of persons with hearing impairment.

Sign Language Interpreter Training

Sign language interpreter training refers to the systematic process of preparing individuals to competently and ethically facilitate communication between Deaf and hearing persons through formal education, supervised practical experience, and continuous professional development. It involves the acquisition of advanced linguistic, cognitive, interpersonal, ethical, and professional competencies necessary for accurate and culturally appropriate interpretation between signed and spoken languages. Unlike informal learning, interpreter training follows structured curricula that combine theoretical knowledge with practical skill development to prepare graduates for professional practice in diverse communication settings (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007).

Interpreter training extends beyond the development of conversational fluency in sign language. Effective training programmes are designed to equip trainees with a broad range of competencies, including sign language linguistics, spoken language proficiency, discourse analysis, interpreting theories, Deaf studies, Deaf culture, ethical decision-making, consecutive and simultaneous interpreting techniques, translation principles, communication accessibility, and profession-specific interpreting such as educational, medical, legal, conference, religious, and community interpreting (Pöchhacker, 2004). These programmes also emphasize critical thinking, message analysis, memory enhancement, note-taking skills, teamwork, professionalism, and reflective practice, all of which are essential for high-quality interpreting.

An important component of interpreter education is experiential learning through supervised internships, field placements, and sustained interaction with Deaf communities. Such practical experiences enable trainees to apply theoretical knowledge in authentic communication environments while developing professional confidence, cultural competence, ethical judgment, and decision-making skills. Dean and Pollard (2001) argue that sign language interpreting is a practice profession, requiring interpreters to continuously analyse linguistic, interpersonal, environmental, and ethical demands in order to make appropriate professional decisions. Consequently, interpreter education should integrate classroom instruction with extensive supervised practice and ongoing professional mentoring.

Internationally, sign language interpreter training has become increasingly institutionalized within universities and specialized professional schools. Many countries now offer diploma, bachelor's, master's, and postgraduate programmes in sign language interpreting, supported by competency-based curricula, accreditation standards, national certification systems, and continuing professional development requirements. These programmes are frequently developed in close collaboration with Deaf communities to ensure linguistic authenticity, cultural responsiveness, and adherence to professional standards (Marschark, Peterson, & Winston, 2005). Such developments have contributed significantly to improving the quality, consistency, and professional recognition of interpreting services worldwide.

Within the Cameroonian context, however, sign language interpreter training remains at an emerging stage of development. Although some universities and higher education institutions have begun introducing sign language and interpreting-related courses within programmes in Special Education, Translation, and Inclusive Education, comprehensive degree programmes dedicated specifically to sign language interpreting remain largely unavailable. Consequently, many practising interpreters acquire their competencies through informal learning pathways, including

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participation in church ministries, interaction with members of the Deaf community, workshops, mentorship, voluntary service, and self-directed learning. While these experiences contribute to the development of communication skills, they often lack the systematic theoretical foundation, competency assessment, supervised practicum, and ethical preparation associated with internationally recognized interpreter education programmes.

For the purpose of this study, sign language interpreter training is operationalised as the structured and competency-based preparation of individuals through formal academic instruction, supervised professional practice, and continuous capacity building to enable them to provide accurate, ethical, culturally appropriate, and professionally accountable interpreting services between Deaf and hearing persons. Within the framework of this study, interpreter training constitutes a fundamental pillar in the professionalization of sign language interpreting and is regarded as essential for improving communication accessibility, strengthening disability inclusion, and promoting the linguistic rights of persons with hearing impairment in Cameroon.

Professionalisation

Professionalisation refers to the process through which an occupation acquires the characteristics and recognition of a formal profession. Greenwood (1957) identifies the core elements of a profession as specialized knowledge, formal training, ethical standards, professional authority, and social recognition. In the context of sign language interpreting, professionalization involves the establishment of standardized training programs, certification systems, codes of ethics, institutional regulation, and professional associations.

Moreover, the concept of professionalisation refers to the process through which an occupation develops recognised standards, ethical principles, formal training structures, and institutional legitimacy. Wilensky (1964) further explains that professionalisation occurs when an occupation develops organized systems for competence assessment and accountability. Thus, the professionalisation of sign language interpreting in Cameroon implies transforming interpreting from an informal voluntary activity into a recognised and regulated profession.

Deaf Community

The Deaf community refers to a linguistic and cultural minority composed primarily of individuals who use sign language as their principal means of communication and who share common cultural values, traditions, social norms, and lived experiences. Membership in the Deaf community is not determined solely by the presence of hearing loss but by active participation in the social and cultural life of Deaf people and the use of sign language as a primary language of interaction (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996). The term Deaf, often written with a capital "D," distinguishes individuals who identify with Deaf culture from those who experience hearing loss primarily as a medical condition and may not identify with the cultural community.

The Deaf community possesses its own cultural identity, social institutions, traditions, artistic expressions, and communication norms, which are transmitted largely through sign language. Deaf culture values visual communication, collective identity, mutual support, and equal access to information. According to Padden and Humphries (1988), Deaf communities worldwide should be understood as linguistic minority groups rather than populations defined solely by disability. This perspective shifts attention from hearing loss to the recognition of sign language as a legitimate language and Deaf people as members of a distinct cultural and linguistic community.

Within the context of Cameroon, the Deaf community comprises individuals with hearing impairment who communicate through sign language and participate in various educational, religious, social, and advocacy organizations. Despite increasing recognition of their communication rights, many members of the Deaf community continue to encounter barriers to education, employment, healthcare, justice, and public participation due to the limited availability of qualified sign language interpreters and accessible communication services. Consequently, strengthening the professionalization of sign language interpreting represents an important strategy for promoting the linguistic rights, cultural identity, and social inclusion of the Deaf community.

Inclusive Communication

Inclusive communication refers to the process of ensuring that information, interactions, and communication services are accessible, understandable, and meaningful to all individuals, regardless of disability, language, age, literacy level, or communication preference. It involves the deliberate removal of communication barriers through the provision of appropriate accommodations such as sign language interpreting, captioning, assistive listening technologies, Braille, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), plain language, and other accessible communication formats (United Nations, 2006; World Health Organization, 2021).

Inclusive communication is founded on the principles of equality, accessibility, participation, and non-discrimination. Rather than expecting individuals with disabilities to adapt to inaccessible communication systems, inclusive communication requires institutions and service providers to adapt their communication practices to meet the diverse needs of all users. This approach aligns with the social model of disability, which recognizes that exclusion often results from environmental and institutional barriers rather than from an individual's impairment.

In educational settings, inclusive communication enables learners with hearing impairment to access classroom instruction, participate in discussions, collaborate with peers, and engage fully in assessment activities through appropriate communication support. Similarly, in healthcare, legal, governmental, religious, and employment settings, inclusive communication ensures that Deaf persons can access accurate information, make informed decisions, and participate equally in society. Within Cameroon, expanding the availability of professional sign language interpreting services constitutes one of the most effective strategies for advancing inclusive communication and improving accessibility across public and private institutions.

Disability Inclusion

Disability inclusion refers to the systematic process of ensuring that persons with disabilities enjoy equal rights, opportunities, participation, and access to all aspects of social, educational, political, cultural, and economic life without discrimination. It involves identifying and removing physical, communication, institutional, attitudinal, and policy barriers that prevent individuals with disabilities from participating fully in society (United Nations, 2006). Disability inclusion is grounded in the principles of human rights, equality, dignity, participation, accessibility, and respect for diversity.

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The concept is closely associated with the Social Model of Disability, which argues that disability results not only from an individual's impairment but also from societal barriers that restrict participation. Consequently, disability inclusion emphasizes transforming environments, policies, services, and institutional practices to accommodate diverse needs rather than requiring persons with disabilities to adapt to inaccessible systems. This perspective has increasingly influenced international disability policies, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Sustainable Development Goals, both of which advocate inclusive and equitable societies.

Within the field of education, disability inclusion involves providing accessible learning environments, appropriate instructional adaptations, assistive technologies, reasonable accommodations, and specialized support services that enable learners with disabilities to achieve their full academic potential alongside their peers. For learners with hearing impairment, effective inclusion depends significantly on communication accessibility through qualified sign language interpreters, teachers proficient in sign language, accessible learning materials, and supportive educational policies.

In Cameroon, disability inclusion has gained increasing policy attention through Law No. 2010/002 of 13 April 2010 relating to the protection and promotion of persons with disabilities and its implementing Decree No. 2018/6233/PM, which promote equal opportunities, accessibility, and participation for persons with disabilities. Nevertheless, significant implementation challenges remain, particularly regarding communication accessibility for Deaf persons. The professionalization of sign language interpreting therefore represents a critical component of disability inclusion by facilitating equitable access to education, healthcare, justice, employment, public administration, and community life, thereby enabling persons with hearing impairment to participate fully in national development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature will essentially focus on the historical development of sign language interpreting, and the current status of sign language interpreting in Cameroon.

Historical Development of Sign Language Interpreting in Cameroon

The history of sign language interpreting in Cameroon is closely connected to the broader development of special education and disability advocacy in the country. Early educational initiatives for persons with hearing impairment were largely introduced by Christian missionaries, churches, and charitable organizations during the colonial and post-colonial periods. These institutions established some of the first schools and support structures for Deaf learners, thereby creating environments in which sign language communication gradually emerged and evolved. Similar patterns have been documented across many African countries, where missionary organizations played a pioneering role in the establishment of Deaf education before governments assumed greater responsibility for special education services (Miles, 2001; UNESCO, 1994). In Cameroon, these early initiatives laid the foundation for the gradual emergence of sign language interpreting as communication needs between Deaf and hearing individuals became increasingly apparent.

During the early stages, interpreting services were largely informal and community-based. Teachers of the Deaf, family members, pastors, church volunteers, and individuals with signing skills frequently assumed the role of interpreters despite having little or no formal training in interpreting theory or professional ethics. Their primary objective was to facilitate basic communication rather than provide professional interpretation based on established standards of accuracy, impartiality, and confidentiality. Consequently, interpreting practices varied considerably according to the interpreter's language proficiency, familiarity with Deaf culture, and personal experience. Humphrey and Alcorn (2007) observe that this pattern of informal interpreting commonly characterized the early development of sign language interpreting in many countries before the establishment of formal interpreter education and certification systems. Pöchhacker (2004) similarly notes that interpreting as a profession generally evolves from informal community practices toward structured professional training and regulation.

The expansion of special education in Cameroon contributed significantly to the increased visibility of Deaf education and communication needs. As more learners with hearing impairment accessed schools and vocational training programs, the demand for communication accessibility also increased. According to UNESCO (1994), inclusive education frameworks worldwide encouraged nations to improve accessibility services for learners with disabilities, including communication support.

The ratification of international disability frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) further influenced disability advocacy in Cameroon. Article 9 of the Convention emphasizes accessibility, while Article 24 advocates inclusive education and communication access for persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2006).

Despite these developments, sign language interpreting in Cameroon remains largely underdeveloped and is still in the early stages of professionalization. Many individuals continue to provide interpreting services without nationally recognized certification, standardized competency assessment, or formal professional regulation. Consequently, the quality and consistency of interpreting services vary across institutions and settings. Greenwood (1957) argues that occupations lacking formal education, standardized qualifications, ethical regulation, and institutional recognition remain in the developmental stages of professionalization. Likewise, Wilensky (1964) emphasizes that the establishment of organized training systems, certification mechanisms, and professional associations constitutes a critical milestone in the transition from an informal occupation to a recognized profession. These observations accurately reflect the current state of sign language interpreting practice in Cameroon. Despite these developments, sign language interpreting in Cameroon remains largely underdeveloped. Many interpreters continue to work without formal certification, standardized assessment, or national professional regulation.

Current Status of Sign Language Interpreting in Cameroon

Sign language interpreting in Cameroon is gradually gaining visibility due to increasing awareness of disability inclusion and communication accessibility. Interpreters are now present in educational institutions, churches, public ceremonies, conferences, community outreach programs, media broadcasts, and some governmental activities. The growing participation of persons with hearing impairment in public life has contributed significantly to the increased demand for interpreting services.

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The current status of sign language interpreting in Cameroon cannot be fully understood without examining the country's legal and policy framework concerning disability inclusion and accessibility. Cameroon has made several commitments toward the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities, particularly in education, communication, and social participation. One of the major legal instruments is Law No. 2010/002 of 13 April 2010 relating to the protection and promotion of persons with disabilities in Cameroon. This law emphasizes equal opportunities, non-discrimination, accessibility, and the inclusion of persons with disabilities in national development. The law also highlights the responsibility of the state to facilitate communication accessibility and educational support for persons with disabilities.

In addition, Decree No. 2018/6233/PM of 26 July 2018 laying down the modalities for the application of Law No. 2010/002 further reinforces provisions concerning accessibility and inclusion. The decree advocates measures aimed at improving access to education, public services, communication, transportation, and professional opportunities for persons with disabilities. Although the implementation of these legal provisions remains limited in practice, they represent important policy foundations for the recognition of sign language interpreting services.

Cameroon is also a signatory to international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which the country ratified in 2014. The Convention emphasizes the rights of Deaf persons to communication accessibility, inclusive education, and participation in public life (United Nations, 2006). Article 9 of the Convention focuses on accessibility, while Article 24 promotes inclusive education and appropriate communication support services.

Within the educational sector, Cameroon's inclusive education efforts have gradually encouraged greater consideration of communication accessibility for learners with hearing impairment. Policies promoting Education for All (EFA), inclusive education, and special needs education have contributed to increased awareness of the importance of sign language and interpreting services in schools and universities. Although sign language interpreting services are insufficient or mostly absent within most educational institutions, there is increasing recognition of the need for communication support for learners with hearing impairment. In educational settings, sign language interpreters are increasingly needed to facilitate communication between learners with hearing impairment and hearing teachers, especially within inclusive schools and higher education institutions. Some universities and teacher-training colleges have started integrating sign language and interpreting-related content into special education programs. However, these training opportunities remain insufficient and are not yet standardized nationally.

The growing recognition of sign language interpreting as a profession has attracted considerable scholarly attention over the past three decades. Rather than viewing interpreting as voluntary or charitable work, contemporary scholars increasingly argue that it should be recognized as a specialized profession requiring advanced linguistic competence, formal education, ethical accountability, certification, and continuing professional development. According to Pöchhacker (2004), the professionalization of interpreting involves the establishment of standardized training programmes, recognized competency frameworks, professional organizations, codes of ethics, quality assurance mechanisms, and institutional recognition. These elements collectively distinguish professional interpreters from untrained bilingual communicators and contribute to the delivery of reliable and accessible communication services.

Similarly, Greenwood's (1957) theory of professionalization maintains that occupations attain professional status through the development of specialized knowledge, systematic education, professional authority, ethical regulation, community recognition, and institutional legitimacy. Applying these principles to sign language interpreting, scholars contend that professional practice cannot rely solely on fluency in sign language; rather, it requires rigorous interpreter education, competency assessment, ethical decision-making, and formal recognition by relevant professional and governmental bodies. Wilensky (1964) likewise argues that the transition from an occupation to a profession depends on the establishment of organized training systems, certification procedures, and mechanisms for professional accountability.

Dean and Pollard (2001) further argue that sign language interpreting should be regarded as a practice profession, comparable to medicine, teaching, counselling, or social work, because interpreters must continuously make complex professional judgments based on linguistic, interpersonal, environmental, and ethical demands. They emphasize that interpreter competence extends beyond language proficiency to include critical thinking, situational analysis, ethical reasoning, and reflective professional practice. Consequently, they advocate supervised professional preparation, mentoring, and continuous professional development as essential components of interpreter education.

Research on interpreter education also demonstrates that the professionalization of sign language interpreting depends heavily on higher education institutions. Marschark, Peterson, and Winston (2005) argue that universities play a central role in preparing competent interpreters through structured curricula that integrate sign language linguistics, Deaf studies, interpreting theories, ethics, practicum experiences, and research skills. Likewise, interpreter education should be developed in close collaboration with Deaf communities to ensure that graduates possess both linguistic competence and cultural responsiveness.

Recent scholarship has further shown that countries where sign language interpreting remains an emerging profession often experience challenges similar to those observed in Cameroon. These include dependence on informal learning pathways, shortages of qualified interpreters, weak institutional recognition, absence of certification systems, and the misconception that interpreting is primarily voluntary or charitable work. Nevertheless, scholars emphasize that sustainable professionalization can be achieved through coordinated efforts involving governments, universities, Deaf organizations, professional associations, and policymakers to establish nationally recognized standards for interpreter education, certification, and practice.

These scholarly perspectives provide an important framework for understanding the current situation in Cameroon. Although the demand for sign language interpreting continues to increase across educational institutions, healthcare facilities, courts, religious organizations, media houses, and public services, many of the institutional characteristics associated with a mature profession such as standardized training, national certification, licensing, professional regulation, and continuing professional development, are still developing. Consequently, the Cameroonian context reflects an emerging profession that requires deliberate policy interventions and institutional investment to attain full professional recognition.

Most interpreters in Cameroon acquire their skills through informal means such as interaction with Deaf communities, church-based programs, workshops, mentorship, or self-learning. Only a limited number receive structured academic training specifically focused on interpreting techniques, ethics, discourse management, and translation accuracy. As a result, interpreting quality often varies considerably among practitioners.

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Moreover, professional recognition of sign language interpreting in Cameroon also remains limited. The country currently lacks a nationally recognized certification system, licensing body, or official regulatory framework for interpreters. Consequently, many individuals practice interpreting without formal qualification assessment. This situation affects the consistency, credibility, and accountability of interpreting services. Working conditions for existing (non-certified) interpreters are often challenging. Many interpreters operate on a voluntary or part-time basis with inadequate remuneration and minimal institutional support. Opportunities for professional development, continuing education, and specialization are also limited. In some settings, interpreters experience physical fatigue, emotional stress, and role confusion due to unclear professional boundaries. Public understanding of the role of sign language interpreters is still relatively low in many parts of Cameroon. Some institutions continue to underestimate the complexity of interpreting work and may perceive interpreters merely as helpers rather than trained professionals. Nevertheless, increased media visibility, disability advocacy, and inclusive education initiatives are gradually improving societal awareness.

Despite these limitations, the current situation also reflects important progress. The inclusion of interpreters during televised public announcements, conferences, and awareness campaigns demonstrates growing recognition of communication accessibility. Deaf associations, educational institutions, advocacy groups, and disability-rights activists continue to push for greater professionalization, training opportunities, policy implementation, and legal recognition of sign language interpreting in Cameroon.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Ernest Greenwood's Professionalization Theory (1957), and the Social Inclusion Theory (1970s).

Ernest Greenwood's Professionalization Theory (1957)

Ernest Greenwood's Professionalization Theory, developed in 1957, is one of the classical sociological theories used to explain how occupations evolve into recognized professions. Greenwood argued that professions are not created instantaneously but emerge through a gradual process of institutional development, during which occupations acquire specialized knowledge, formal education, ethical standards, professional authority, and societal recognition (Greenwood, 1957). The theory has been widely applied in fields such as education, nursing, social work, counselling, and allied health professions to examine the extent to which emerging occupations have attained professional status.

According to Greenwood (1957), a profession is distinguished from other occupations by five fundamental attributes. The first is systematic theory, which refers to the existence of a well-developed body of specialized knowledge acquired through formal education, research, and professional training. Members of a profession are expected to possess theoretical and practical expertise that distinguishes them from untrained practitioners. The second attribute is professional authority, whereby society recognizes professionals as competent experts capable of making informed decisions within their area of specialization. Such authority is derived from advanced knowledge, demonstrated competence, and adherence to professional standards.

The third attribute is community sanction, which refers to the formal recognition and regulation of a profession by governmental authorities, professional organizations, or regulatory agencies. Community sanction often takes the form of legislation, licensing systems, accreditation procedures, and certification mechanisms that define who is qualified to practise the profession. The fourth attribute is a code of ethics, which establishes the moral and professional principles governing practitioners' conduct. Ethical standards ensure accountability, confidentiality, impartiality, integrity, and responsibility while promoting public trust in the profession. Finally, Greenwood identifies a professional culture as an essential characteristic of every mature profession. Professional culture encompasses shared values, norms, traditions, professional identity, continuing education, collaboration among practitioners, and commitment to lifelong learning.

Greenwood's theory suggests that an occupation progresses through a process of professionalization by gradually developing these defining characteristics. As an occupation expands its knowledge base, establishes standardized educational programmes, creates professional associations, adopts ethical codes, introduces certification procedures, and gains legal and societal recognition, it increasingly acquires the status and legitimacy of a profession. Conversely, occupations that lack these institutional structures often remain informal or semi-professional despite growing public demand for their services. Wilensky (1964) similarly argues that professionalization involves the sequential establishment of full-time practice, specialized education, professional associations, formal regulation, and ethical accountability.

The theory has significant relevance to the field of sign language interpreting. Internationally, sign language interpreting has evolved from voluntary community service into a recognized profession through the establishment of university degree programmes, competency-based training, professional certification systems, national interpreter associations, ethical codes, and continuing professional development. Professional organizations such as the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) in the United States and comparable regulatory bodies in several other countries have contributed substantially to defining standards of competence, ethics, and professional accountability. These developments demonstrate the practical application of Greenwood's attributes in the evolution of sign language interpreting as a profession.

Within the Cameroonian context, however, many of the institutional characteristics identified by Greenwood remain only partially developed. Although awareness of sign language interpreting has increased considerably and demand for interpreting services continues to expand across education, healthcare, justice, media, religious institutions, and public administration, interpreter education remains limited, nationally recognized certification systems are absent, professional regulation is still evolving, and employment opportunities are relatively scarce. In addition, there is no nationally established professional body responsible for regulating interpreter practice, enforcing ethical standards, or maintaining a register of qualified sign language interpreters. These realities suggest that sign language interpreting in Cameroon is currently transitioning from an informal occupation toward an emerging profession.

The applicability of Greenwood's Professionalization Theory to the present study lies in its ability to provide a conceptual framework for assessing the current level of professional development of sign language interpreting in Cameroon. The theory offers analytical criteria through which the study examines existing interpreter-training programmes, professional competencies, ethical practice, institutional recognition, certification mechanisms, and policy support. It also helps identify the institutional gaps that continue to hinder the development of sign language interpreting as a fully recognized profession. Furthermore, the theory provides a useful basis for proposing practical strategies aimed at strengthening interpreter

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education, establishing national certification systems, developing professional associations, promoting ethical regulation, and enhancing governmental recognition of sign language interpreting.

Ultimately, Greenwood's Professionalization Theory aligns closely with the central purpose of this study, which seeks to examine ongoing efforts toward the professionalization of sign language interpreting in Cameroon. By explaining the characteristics of mature professions and the processes through which occupations achieve professional status, the theory offers an appropriate lens for interpreting the findings and informing the proposed roadmap for institutionalizing sign language interpreting as a certified university programme and a nationally recognized profession.

Social Inclusion Theory (1970s)

Social Inclusion Theory emerged progressively during the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in Europe, as a response to increasing concerns about poverty, unemployment, discrimination, marginalization, and the exclusion of vulnerable groups from mainstream society. The concept gained greater prominence during the 1990s through international human rights movements and global policy initiatives that promoted equality, participation, and non-discrimination. In recent decades, Social Inclusion Theory has become a central framework in disability studies, inclusive education, social policy, and community development because it emphasizes the right of every individual to participate fully in social, educational, political, cultural, and economic life, irrespective of disability, gender, ethnicity, language, or socioeconomic status (Silver, 2015; United Nations, 2006).

The theory is founded on the principle that exclusion is not an inevitable consequence of an individual's impairment but rather the result of environmental, institutional, communication, and attitudinal barriers that prevent equal participation. Consequently, social inclusion requires governments, institutions, and communities to identify and remove these barriers by creating accessible environments, implementing inclusive policies, and providing appropriate support services that enable meaningful participation for all citizens. In the context of persons with hearing impairment, such support services include sign language recognition, qualified sign language interpreters, accessible educational resources, captioning services, and other communication accommodations that facilitate equal access to information and public services (World Health Organization, 2021).

Within the field of disability, Social Inclusion Theory complements the human rights approach embodied in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which recognizes communication accessibility as a prerequisite for the realization of many fundamental rights. Articles 9, 21, and 24 of the Convention specifically require States Parties to promote accessibility, freedom of expression and access to information, and inclusive education through the provision of appropriate communication support, including professional sign language interpreters (United Nations, 2006). The theory therefore provides a strong conceptual foundation for understanding why communication accessibility should be viewed as a matter of social justice and human rights rather than charity or welfare.

The applicability of Social Inclusion Theory to this study lies in its ability to explain the important role that professional sign language interpreting plays in facilitating the full participation of Deaf persons in society. Communication barriers continue to limit access to education, healthcare, employment, judicial services, governance, religious activities, and community life for many persons with hearing impairment in Cameroon. From the perspective of Social Inclusion Theory, these barriers are not created by hearing impairment itself but by the absence of adequate communication support systems, including professionally trained and readily available sign language interpreters. The theory therefore helps to explain why strengthening interpreter education, certification, ethical regulation, and professional recognition is essential for promoting equal opportunities and reducing the exclusion experienced by members of the Deaf community.

Furthermore, this theory provides an appropriate analytical lens for interpreting the findings of the present study. It supports the argument that the professionalization of sign language interpreting extends beyond workforce development; it is also a mechanism for advancing disability inclusion, protecting linguistic and communication rights, and promoting equitable participation in national development. As Cameroon continues to strengthen its inclusive education agenda and implement disability legislation, the availability of competent and professionally recognized sign language interpreters will be indispensable for ensuring that persons with hearing impairment enjoy equal access to public services and can participate meaningfully in all spheres of society. Consequently, Social Inclusion Theory underpins the study's call for structured interpreter education programmes, national certification systems, institutional recognition, and stronger policy implementation as essential strategies for achieving inclusive communication and sustainable disability inclusion in Cameroon.

Statement of the Problem

Communication is a fundamental human right and an essential prerequisite for equitable access to education, healthcare, justice, employment, and public participation. For Deaf persons and other sign language users, sign language interpreting serves as the primary bridge between signed and spoken languages, facilitating meaningful interaction and ensuring inclusion in all spheres of society. Globally, increasing recognition of the rights of persons with disabilities, particularly following the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), has heightened the demand for competent and professionally trained sign language interpreters. Despite these international commitments, the provision of professional sign language interpreting services remains uneven across many low- and middle-income countries, including Cameroon.

In Cameroon, significant efforts have been made to promote inclusive education and protect the rights of persons with disabilities through national legislation and policy initiatives. However, these commitments have not been matched by the development of a robust and professional sign language interpreting system. Sign language interpreting is still largely characterised by informal practice, with many interpreters serving without standardised training, recognised certification, professional regulation, or a clearly defined code of ethics. Consequently, interpreting quality varies considerably across educational institutions, healthcare facilities, courts, religious organisations, and public events, often compromising the accuracy of communication and limiting the full participation of Deaf persons in society.

The absence of a structured professional framework has created multiple challenges. There is a shortage of qualified interpreters, limited opportunities for formal interpreter education, inadequate institutional support, and little recognition of sign language interpreting as a specialised profession. Furthermore, inconsistent remuneration, poor working conditions, limited career progression, and the absence of a national regulatory

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body have discouraged many potential practitioners from pursuing sign language interpreting as a long-term career. These challenges not only undermine the quality of interpreting services but also perpetuate communication barriers, social exclusion, and unequal access to essential services for Deaf individuals.

Although studies on disability, inclusive education, and Deaf education in Cameroon have gradually increased, relatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to the professionalisation of sign language interpreting itself. Existing literature tends to focus on educational inclusion or the experiences of Deaf learners, while providing limited empirical evidence on the structural, institutional, educational, and policy factors that constrain the development of interpreting as a recognised profession. Consequently, there remains insufficient understanding of the specific challenges confronting sign language interpreters and the practical strategies required to establish sustainable professional standards within the Cameroonian context.

This knowledge gap presents a significant obstacle to evidence-based policy formulation and the development of effective interpreter training and accreditation systems. Without a comprehensive understanding of the barriers to professionalisation and the pathways for strengthening the profession, efforts to improve communication accessibility and promote the rights of Deaf persons may remain fragmented and ineffective. It is against this background that this study seeks to examine the challenges facing sign language interpreting in Cameroon and identify practical pathways toward its professionalisation. The study aims to generate evidence that can inform policy reforms, strengthen interpreter education and certification, enhance professional standards, and ultimately improve access to quality interpreting services for Deaf communities across Cameroon.

METHODOLOGY

This section presents the research design used for the study, the scope of the study, the sources of the data, the selection of documents, the data collection procedure, the method of data analysis, the trustworthiness of the study, ethical considerations, and the limitations of the study.

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design based on documentary research and contextual analysis. Qualitative research is appropriate for studies that seek to explore, interpret, and provide an in-depth understanding of social phenomena within their natural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than generating numerical data, the study sought to critically examine the evolution of sign language interpreting in Cameroon and assess ongoing efforts toward its professionalization through the analysis of existing literature, legal instruments, policy documents, institutional reports, and scholarly publications.

Documentary research was considered particularly suitable because the study focused on synthesizing existing knowledge regarding interpreter education, professional standards, disability inclusion, and communication accessibility. Contextual analysis further enabled the researchers to interpret these issues within the socio-cultural, educational, and legislative realities of Cameroon while drawing comparisons with international best practices in sign language interpreting.

Sources of Data

The study relied exclusively on secondary data obtained from a wide range of documentary sources. These included peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, conference proceedings, doctoral theses, government policy documents, legislative texts, reports published by international organizations such as the United Nations, UNESCO, and the World Health Organization, as well as publications from professional associations involved in sign language interpreting and Deaf studies. These sources provided comprehensive information on interpreter education, professional ethics, disability legislation, communication accessibility, and international developments in sign language interpreting.

Selection of Documents

Documents included in the review were purposively selected based on their relevance to the objectives of the study. Preference was given to publications addressing sign language interpreting, interpreter education, professionalization, Deaf studies, disability inclusion, communication accessibility, and inclusive education. Particular attention was paid to documents relating to Cameroon and Sub-Saharan Africa, while internationally recognized literature was incorporated to provide broader theoretical and professional perspectives. Official legal and policy documents were also included because they constitute the principal regulatory framework governing disability rights and accessibility within Cameroon.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection involved a systematic search and review of relevant academic and policy literature. Electronic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, ERIC, JSTOR, and institutional repositories were consulted using keywords including sign language interpreting, professionalization, Deaf community, interpreter education, Cameroon, disability inclusion, inclusive communication, and communication accessibility. In addition, official government publications, legal documents, and reports from international organizations were examined to obtain current information on disability policies and interpreter development. Retrieved documents were screened for relevance, credibility, and consistency with the objectives of the study before being included in the analysis.

Method of Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using thematic content analysis. This method involved carefully reading and interpreting the selected documents, identifying recurring concepts and patterns, organizing similar ideas into thematic categories, and synthesizing findings according to the objectives of the study. Major themes that emerged included the historical evolution of sign language interpreting, legal and policy frameworks, interpreter education and training, professional standards, ethical practice, institutional support, challenges to professionalization, and strategies for strengthening the profession in Cameroon. The thematic approach facilitated a coherent interpretation of the literature while allowing relationships among the identified themes to be examined.

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Trustworthiness of the Study

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study drew upon multiple categories of documentary evidence, including academic literature, legal instruments, policy documents, and publications from internationally recognized organizations. Information obtained from different sources was compared and triangulated to ensure consistency and minimize bias. Furthermore, preference was given to authoritative and peer-reviewed publications, while official government documents were used to verify legislative and policy information relating to disability inclusion and communication accessibility in Cameroon.

Presentation of Findings and Discussion

The thematic analysis of the reviewed literature, policy documents, and institutional reports generated three major themes that explain the evolution and current state of sign language interpreting in Cameroon. These themes are discussed below in relation to the objectives of the study and the theoretical frameworks underpinning the research.

Challenges Affecting the Professionalization of Sign Language Interpreting in Cameroon

This theme identifies the major challenges preventing sign language interpreting from developing into a fully recognized profession in Cameroon. Across the reviewed literature, several recurring barriers emerged, including inadequate interpreter education, lack of standardized certification, shortage of qualified interpreters, weak professional recognition, limited public awareness, poor working conditions, absence of ethical regulation, and the country's multilingual linguistic environment.

One can start listing the lack of adequate training programmes. The major challenges facing sign language interpreting in Cameroon is the limited availability of specialized interpreter-training programs. Existing programmes often focus generally on special education rather than professional interpreting competencies such as simultaneous interpreting, consecutive interpreting, discourse analysis, and ethical decision-making. Humphrey and Alcorn (2007) argue that professional interpreting requires systematic and rigorous training beyond conversational signing skills.

Another challenge is the lack of standardized certification. Cameroon currently lacks a nationally recognized certification and licensing system for sign language interpreters. Without standardized assessment mechanisms, interpreter competence varies significantly. This situation limits accountability and affects public trust in interpreting services. Similarly, there is a shortage of qualified interpreters. The number of professionally trained interpreters in Cameroon remains very low compared to the growing demand for services in schools, hospitals, churches, conferences, and courts. This shortage negatively affects communication accessibility for individuals with hearing impairment.

In the same way, a limited public awareness is observed in the entire country. Public understanding of Deaf culture and sign language interpreting remains relatively low. Many institutions underestimate the complexity of interpreting work and fail to recognize interpreting as a specialized profession. Lane et al. (1996) emphasise that misconceptions about Deafness and sign language often contribute to social exclusion. Eventually, the majority of individuals engaged in sign language interpreting works under difficult conditions characterized by low remuneration, lack of contractual protection, emotional stress, and limited opportunities for professional advancement. Such conditions discourage long-term commitment to the profession.

Since the profession is not yet fully recognized nationally, there is no ethical regulation governing those who are currently practicing sign language interpreting. The absence of a nationally recognized code of ethics and regulatory body creates challenges related to confidentiality, neutrality, professionalism, and accountability. In developed countries like the USA, there are professional associations such as the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) in the USA which emphasize ethical conduct as a central component of professional interpreting practice. In addition, the linguistic diversity of Cameroon constitutes another important challenge. Cameroon's multilingual environment presents considerable interpreting challenges, as interpreters often navigate among English, French, national languages, and different sign language influences. This linguistic diversity may complicate meaning transfer and communication accuracy.

Viewed through Greenwood's Professionalization Theory, these findings suggest that Cameroon has not yet established many of the institutional structures that define mature professions, including nationally recognized standards, professional licensing, and continuing professional development systems.

Emerging Efforts Toward Professionalization

Despite the numerous challenges identified, the reviewed literature also highlights encouraging developments that indicate gradual progress toward professionalization. Universities, teacher-training institutions, Deaf associations, disability advocacy organizations, international development partners, and media institutions have collectively contributed to increasing awareness of sign language interpreting and expanding communication accessibility.

For instance, in the academic milieu, some universities and higher institutions like the University of Yaounde I, the Advanced School of Translators and Interpreters (ASTI) in University of Buea are gradually introducing sign language and interpreting-related courses within their programmes. These initiatives contribute to developing professional competence and academic recognition for interpreting. Likewise, associations of persons with disability, association of the Deaf, and national and international advocacy organizations continue to campaign for communication accessibility, interpreter availability, and recognition of sign language rights. Their advocacy efforts have contributed significantly to public awareness and policy discussions concerning inclusion of persons with disabilities, especially those with hearing impairment.

Beside the above, international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities encourage states to promote accessibility and communication rights for persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2006). These frameworks have influenced disability policies and advocacy efforts in Cameroon. Also, there are some media accessibility initiatives observed in some TV programmes on channels like Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV), Vision 4, and some other online media. The inclusion of sign language interpreters during televised news, and public awareness campaigns reflects growing societal recognition of accessibility needs. Media visibility has also contributed to increasing awareness of the interpreting profession.

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Furthermore, there are emerging professional networks observed in Africa and in Cameroon. Individuals working as sign language interpreters in Cameroon are gradually forming professional networks aimed at sharing experiences, promoting sign language visibility, advocating for inclusion for the Deaf, and battling for professional recognition. The findings indicate that these initiatives, although still fragmented, provide an important foundation for future professional development. Their continued expansion could significantly improve interpreter education, institutional recognition, and communication accessibility throughout Cameroon.

Professionalisation as a Strategy for Inclusive Communication and Disability Inclusion

This final theme demonstrates that the professionalisation of sign language interpreting extends beyond workforce development and represents an important strategy for promoting inclusive communication, protecting linguistic rights, and advancing disability inclusion. The reviewed literature consistently emphasizes that communication accessibility is fundamental to equal participation in education, healthcare, justice, governance, employment, and community life.

Strategic Roadmap for the Implementation of Sign Language Interpreting as a Certified University Programme in Cameroon

The growing demand for qualified sign language interpreters in Cameroon requires higher education institutions to move beyond short-term workshops and informal training toward fully structured academic and professional programmes. A strategic roadmap can guide universities and higher professional institutions in implementing sign language interpreting as a certified and sustainable field of study. The proposed roadmap consists of eight interrelated phases that collectively contribute to the development of a nationally recognized interpreter education system.

Phase one concerns the needs of assessment and stakeholder consultation. This first phase should involve a comprehensive needs assessment aimed at identifying the communication accessibility needs of educational institutions, healthcare facilities, courts, churches, media organizations, governmental institutions, and other public services. Universities should engage in extensive consultations with key stakeholders, including associations of the Deaf, practising sign language interpreters, the Ministries of Basic Education, Secondary Education, Higher Education, Employment and Vocational Training, the Ministry of Social Affairs, universities, higher professional institutions, organizations of persons with disabilities, and relevant international partners. Such consultations would provide valuable information regarding labour-market demands, institutional expectations, professional competencies, and contextual realities that should inform the design of interpreter-training programmes.

Phase two has to do with the curriculum development. Following the needs assessment, universities should develop standardized undergraduate and postgraduate curricula in sign language interpreting that integrate theoretical knowledge with extensive practical training. The curriculum should encompass courses in Deaf Studies, Cameroon Sign Language, Sign Language Linguistics, Deaf Culture and Identity, consecutive and simultaneous interpreting, interpreting theories, discourse analysis, educational, medical and legal interpreting, communication accessibility, professional ethics, research methods, and supervised internships. Equally important is the incorporation of regular immersion experiences within Deaf communities to strengthen students' linguistic competence, cultural understanding, and professional confidence. A competency-based curriculum of this nature would ensure that graduates possess the knowledge, practical skills, and ethical dispositions required for professional interpreting practice.

Phase three is in relation with institutional recognition and accreditation. In fact, the successful implementation of interpreter education programmes depends on official institutional recognition and national accreditation. Universities should therefore collaborate closely with the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training to establish nationally accepted standards governing interpreter education. Accreditation should define programme admission requirements, duration of study, curriculum content, competency expectations, assessment procedures, internship requirements, ethical standards, graduation criteria, and certification requirements. Establishing such quality assurance mechanisms would promote consistency across institutions and enhance the credibility and national recognition of interpreter qualifications.

Phase four is based on the recruitment and the capacity building of trainers. The phase involves strengthening the capacity of institutions responsible for delivering interpreter education. Given the current shortage of qualified interpreter educators in Cameroon, universities should invest in staff development through international academic partnerships, faculty exchange programmes, scholarships for advanced studies in sign language interpreting, professional development workshops, and collaborative research initiatives. Experienced Deaf professionals and native sign language users should be actively involved in curriculum delivery, practical instruction, and student mentoring to ensure linguistic authenticity and cultural relevance. Building institutional capacity in this manner would significantly improve the quality and sustainability of interpreter education.

The next phase five deals with the establishment of certification and professional bodies. Obviously, professionalization cannot be achieved without effective systems for regulating professional practice. Consequently, higher education institutions should work in collaboration with government agencies, professional associations, and organizations representing the Deaf community to establish national certification mechanisms and a professional regulatory body for sign language interpreters. Such institutions would be responsible for developing competency standards, administering certification examinations, maintaining professional registers, enforcing ethical codes, promoting continuing professional development, organizing conferences and workshops, and advocating for the interests and welfare of professional interpreters. These functions are fundamental to ensuring professional accountability and public confidence in interpreting services.

Moreso, phase six has to do with the practical training and field placement. Indeed, sign language interpreter education programmes should include extensive supervised practical training within authentic professional settings. Students should undertake structured internships in schools, universities, hospitals, courts, churches, media organizations, governmental institutions, and community-based organizations where sign language interpreting services are required. These placements should be supervised jointly by experienced hearing interpreters and Deaf mentors to provide balanced professional guidance and comprehensive performance evaluation. Such practical experiences are essential for developing interpreting competence, ethical decision-making, professional judgment, and confidence in real-life communication situations.

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The following steps phase seven is in relation with research and continuous programme evaluation. Naturally, universities should establish strong research programmes in sign language interpreting, Deaf Studies, communication accessibility, and inclusive education. Research activities would generate locally relevant evidence to guide curriculum improvement, policy formulation, and professional practice while contributing to the growing body of scholarship on sign language interpreting in Cameroon. In addition, interpreter education programmes should undergo regular monitoring and evaluation to assess graduate competence, curriculum relevance, teaching effectiveness, stakeholder satisfaction, and emerging labour-market needs. Continuous programme evaluation would facilitate evidence-based improvements and ensure that training remains responsive to national and international developments in the profession.

The final phase eight has to do with public awareness and policy advocacy. This last step should focus on promoting public awareness and strengthening policy advocacy to support the institutionalization of sign language interpreting as a recognized profession. Universities should collaborate with government ministries, media organizations, civil society organizations, disability advocacy groups, and associations of the Deaf to raise awareness about the importance of professional interpreting services. Advocacy efforts should encourage the recognition of sign language interpreting as a distinct profession, promote the employment of qualified interpreters across public institutions, strengthen the implementation of disability legislation, and reinforce communication accessibility as a fundamental human right. Sustained public engagement and policy advocacy would contribute significantly to the long-term sustainability of interpreter education programmes and the broader professionalization of sign language interpreting in Cameroon.

Interpreted through the lens of Social Inclusion Theory, these findings illustrate that professional sign language interpreting contributes directly to the removal of communication barriers that prevent Deaf persons from participating fully in society. Consequently, strengthening interpreter education, certification, ethical regulation, and governmental recognition represents an essential component of inclusive national development in Cameroon.

CONCLUSION

This study examined sign language interpreting in Cameroon with particular emphasis on ongoing efforts toward its professionalization. Through a qualitative documentary approach supported by thematic content analysis, the study explored the historical evolution of sign language interpreting, the current landscape of interpreting services, the institutional and structural challenges affecting the profession, emerging professionalization initiatives, and the contribution of professional interpreting to inclusive communication and disability inclusion. The findings demonstrate that sign language interpreting in Cameroon has evolved from an informal, volunteer-based activity into an emerging profession whose importance continues to grow across education, healthcare, the judiciary, governance, religious institutions, media, and community services. Despite this encouraging progress, the study reveals that the profession remains constrained by inadequate interpreter education programmes, the absence of nationally recognized certification and licensing systems, limited professional regulation, insufficient institutional support, poor remuneration, and a shortage of qualified interpreters. These limitations continue to undermine communication accessibility and restrict the meaningful participation of persons with hearing impairment in many aspects of national life.

The application of Greenwood's Professionalization Theory highlights that while sign language interpreting in Cameroon has begun to acquire some characteristics of a profession, several essential attributes, including standardized education, professional authority, ethical regulation, certification, and community sanction, are yet to be fully developed. Likewise, Social Inclusion Theory demonstrates that communication accessibility is indispensable for achieving equitable participation and that professional sign language interpreting constitutes a critical mechanism for removing communication barriers experienced by members of the Deaf community.

Based on these findings, the study argues that the professionalization of sign language interpreting should become a national priority within Cameroon's inclusive education and disability inclusion agenda. Achieving this goal will require coordinated collaboration among government ministries, universities, organizations of persons with disabilities, Deaf associations, interpreter practitioners, professional bodies, and international development partners. Particular attention should be given to establishing accredited university programmes in sign language interpreting, creating national certification and licensing mechanisms, strengthening professional associations, promoting continuous professional development, and implementing comprehensive ethical and quality assurance frameworks.

Ultimately, professionalizing sign language interpreting extends far beyond improving interpreter competence. It represents an investment in communication accessibility, educational equity, human rights, and social justice. By institutionalizing interpreter education and strengthening professional recognition, Cameroon will be better positioned to fulfil its national and international commitments to disability inclusion while empowering Deaf persons to participate fully and equally in every sphere of society.

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