Journal of Asian Multicultural Research for Social Sciences Study
ISSN: 2708-969X
Vol. 6 No. 1, 2025 (page 013-020)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47616/jamrsss.v6i1.578

Kuwaiti Sign Language

Bader Al-Dookhi[1], Haya Alotaibi[2]

[1]Researching and Instructing Kuwaiti Sign Language with a Master's degree in Deaf Education, Kuwait

[2]Gulf University for Science and Technology, Kuwait

Received: February 4, 2025 Received in Revised: February 7, 2025 Accepted: February 12, 2025

Abstract

Kuwaiti Sign Language is a chapter in the book alasalyb walnzryat alhdytha fy t'lym altalb alasm ("Modern Methods and Theories in Teaching the Deaf Student"), written by Kuwaiti sign language interpreter and instructor Bader Al-Dookhi in 2018. The book explores key aspects of deaf education and linguistics. This translation serves multiple objectives: contributing valuable insights to the field of linguistics, highlighting KSL as an independent and fully developed language, fostering inclusivity, and encouraging both individuals and institutions to engage with the language.

Keywords: Kuwaiti Sign Language (KSL), Kuwait, Deaf

Introduction

Sign language globally are distinct, natural languages with their own grammatical structures and lexicons, independent of spoken languages. Kuwaiti Sign Language (KSL) is no exception. Considered a fully developed visual language used by the Kuwaiti Deaf community, KSL plays a crucial role in education, identity formation, and communication. However, despite its significance, KSL has not received the same recognition or institutional support as spoken Arabic.

This translation of Bader Al-Dookhi's Kuwaiti Sign Language chapter form Modern Methods and Theories in Teaching the Deaf Student (2018) aims to contribute to the broader discussion of sign language linguistics, highlighting KSL as an independent language deserving of further study and acknowledgement. This translated work sheds light on key aspects of KSL, including its phonological, morphological, and syntactic structures, as well as its role in deaf education.

Focusing on research from linguists such as William Stokoe, James Cummins, and Carol Padden, Al-Dookhi explored the natural acquisition of sign language, the challenges of integrating both spoken and signed languages into education, and the implications of recognizing sign language as a legitimate mode of communication. The text also examines the development of the language through interactions by the deaf community. A critical concern addressed in the original work is the tendency to impose spoken-language structures onto KSL, particularly through attempts to create standardized or artificial signs based on Arabic. Efforts like these often fail to capture the linguistic nuances of sign languages and risk marginalizing the deaf community's natural communication methods. This text emphasizes the importance of studying KSL on its own terms rather than treating it as a derivative of Arabic. By making this work accessible to an English-speaking audience, this translation serves multiple objectives.

It promotes linguistic inclusivity, raises awareness about the status of KSL within the Kuwaiti society, and encourage further research on the language. Through this work, educators, linguists and policymakers can gain initial insights into KSL's structure and its role in the lives of deaf

Kuwaitis. This translation ultimately seeks to foster great recognition and respect for linguistic diversity, specifically in Kuwait.

Results and Discussion

Kuwaiti Sign Language

Cummins (1984) stated that the language taught in schools is based on the notion that language should provide students with countless opportunities to learn about the language, know more about it, and learn through it. While studying how children acquire language, linguists Cummins and Krashen determined that language learning is a developmental process that goes through predictable and continuous stages. Cummins also stated that children use language in two ways; first is to acquire social skills to learn more about themselves and the world around them. The second way is to acquire the process of developing necessary grammatical skills to be a successful user of language and knowledge (1984).

Deaf children acquire fluency in their mother tongue, Kuwaiti Sign Language (KSL), because it is the first language they can access and are exposed to. Therefore, knowledge of Kuwaiti Sign Language will enhance the student's use of the language and ensure that the student: (1) Will be in an environment that fosters the development of their Kuwaiti Sign Language skills; (2) Will realize that Kuwaiti Sign Language can ensure control in utilizing the language effectively; (3) Will realize that knowing Kuwaiti Sign Language will help him become an educated and informed citizen. Kuwaiti Sign Language developed as a complete and independent language with complex grammar.

It is not derived from Modern Standard Arabic, and like any spoken language, KSL has rules for making words by combining linguistic elements into small groups to create sentences. Native sign language has been legally recognized as an official language for the deaf community in many countries, granting it equal status to spoken and written language. There is an article in the Charter of Human Rights that emphasizes the respect and recognition of sign language. However, despite this legal recognition, many individuals within Kuwait as well as most Arab countries do not recognize local sign languages. Also, many KSL users, both deaf and hearing, are unaware of what sign language is.

Kuwaiti Sign Language is a spatial-visual language governed by its own set of linguistic rules These rules include movement, location, and the shapes of various body parts, particularly the hands, arms, shoulders, eyes, face, and head. All sign languages are designed to be compatible with both the visual ability of the eyes and the motor capabilities of the body. Another essential aspect of Kuwaiti Sign Language is fingerspelling, which represents the Arabic alphabet. It is primarily used for proper nouns, exact representations of written forms, or for precise spelling of words (Stokoe, 1960).

Kuwaiti Sign Language has evolved naturally over time amongst individuals who use it. One of the unique characteristics of Kuwaiti sing language is that it continues to change over time, driven by the deaf community itself. This change is ongoing, as evident in the new expressions emerging in response to modern technology. Whether or not you are involved in teaching the deaf, the following section will provide you with a clear understanding of Kuwaiti Sign Language. In the 1960s, American linguist William Stokoe pioneered the modern linguistic study of sign language by presenting sign languages as natural languages with their own distinct lexicon and grammatical structures. Stokoe's study revolutionized the way teachers of the deaf viewed the oral method.

Stokoe described signs in sign language as: "A sign is not a picture; rather, it is an abstract and whole symbol that can be analyzed into parts." He also defined American Sign Language,

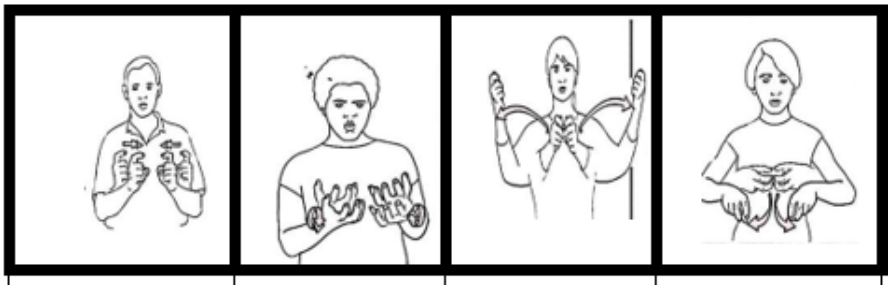
specifically as “A language usually called signs, and it includes location, shape, and movements that function similarly to spoken language.” It exists instead of the phoneme (a small unit of language that helps distinguish pronunciation). However, what is more important is that it is a language with its own syntax, morphology, and pragmatics. Linguists have discovered that sign languages share many characteristics with spoken languages. Spoken languages utilize sound units to produce words; sign languages, on the other hand, utilize shape units (which include movements, handshape, and locations, as previously mentioned). These shape units have no meaning of their own and must be combined to create a word. These shapes will be discussed in detail.

Researchers and educators have continued to clarify what sign language is, emphasizing that it is not merely a communication tool but a language in its own right. Bienvenu (1994) stated, “methods or approaches are not acquired naturally like languages”. They are developed by individuals and taught to specific groups of people for a particular purpose. While methods can be useful for tasks like education, they are not a substitute for natural (native) languages.” Kuwaiti Sign Language (KSL) differs significantly from spoken and written language, particularly Modern Standard Arabic (MSA).

The rules of KSL deviate from MSA’s because MSA is primarily a spoken language with writing as a secondary form. In contrast, KSL is exclusively a visual language, where signs serve as the primary and only mode of expression. Moreover, the rules of sign languages, including KSL, are not derived from spoken or written language, like MSA. Linguists have found that sign languages, spoken languages, and written languages share many commonalities. Spoken and written languages rely on sound units to form words, while sign languages are composed of four primary elements: handshapes (e.g., open fist, closed fist), hand location (e.g., center of the forehead, front of the chest), hand movement (e.g., up – down), and hand orientation (e.g., palm faced upward, palm faced outward).

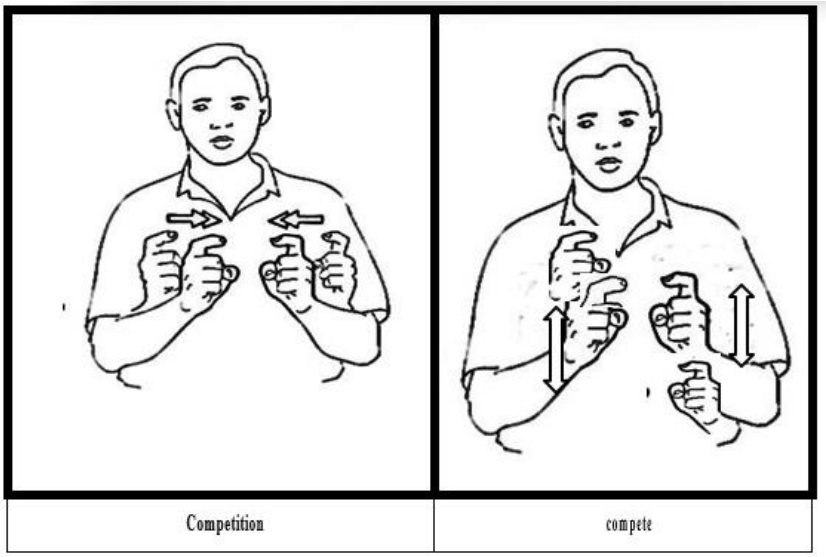
Stokoe suggested that each sign has at least three independent parts: location (on the body or in the air), handshape (spread or twisted fingers, hand fist, etc.), and hand movement (one or both hands, in circles, upwards, downwards, or forwards). Sound or phonemes units are combined in spoken languages to form meaning. For example, the letters (b – o – o - k) are meaningless, nonetheless, combined they form the word “book”. Similarly, combining sign units alone does not create meaning, but combining them creates meaning. Spoken languages differ in the way sound units are combined to form words, meanings, and sounds, which are combined sequentially. In contrast, sign languages combine units of form and meaning simultaneously.

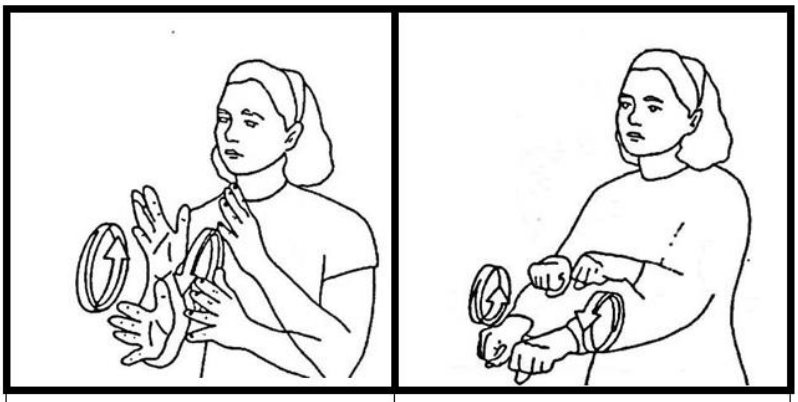
Sign formations are based on two fundamental principles, the first is “Symmetry” and the second is “Dominance” (Battison, 1978). The symmetry condition states that if a sign is made using both hands, the handshapes and movements must be identical. This is evident in signs such as (competition – fire – newspaper - egg).



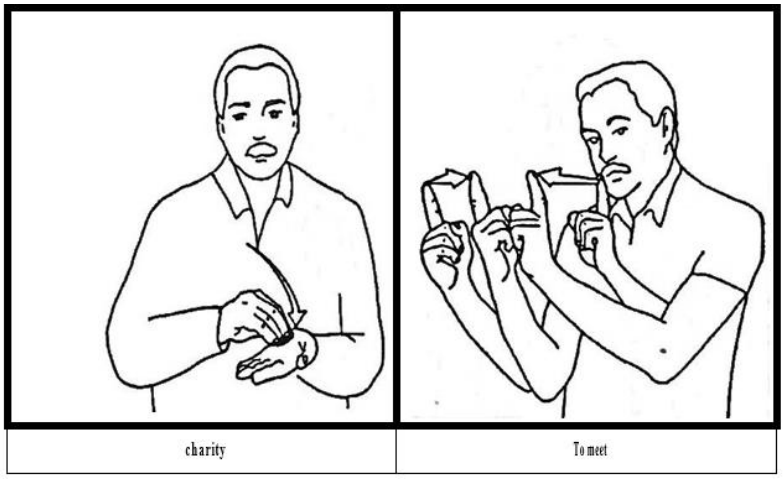
As for the condition of dominance, Battison states that if a sign is made using both hands, and each hand has a different shape, the active hand moves, while the passive hand remains stationary. Examples of signs with the dominance condition include (window – remembers – does not understand anything – born). Further, when both hands are used to make a sign with different handshapes, the passive hand tends to be one of the basic handshapes (h - n - sˤ - s – b - ʔ - and the number 5).

From this information, we derive that the structure of Kuwaiti Sign Language is systematic, and signs can be grouped into different categories. Signs like “competition” and “competing” are different from signs like “bicycle” and a “sign”.





Just as the Arabic language has rules that determine the permissible sequences of vowels and consonants, sign languages follow structured rules for combining four key elements: shape, movement, location, and orientation. These rules ensure that signs are easy to produce and perceive, enhancing communication efficiency. One such rule of sign language structure states that if both hands are moving in a sign, the handshapes, locations, and movements of the hands must be identical. An example is the sign for "to meet". However, if the handshapes differ, one hand must remain stationary. In Kuwaiti Sign Language, only seven handshapes are allowed for a stationary hand. An example of this is the sign for "charity", where the index finger (active hand) strikes the open palm of the stationary hand.

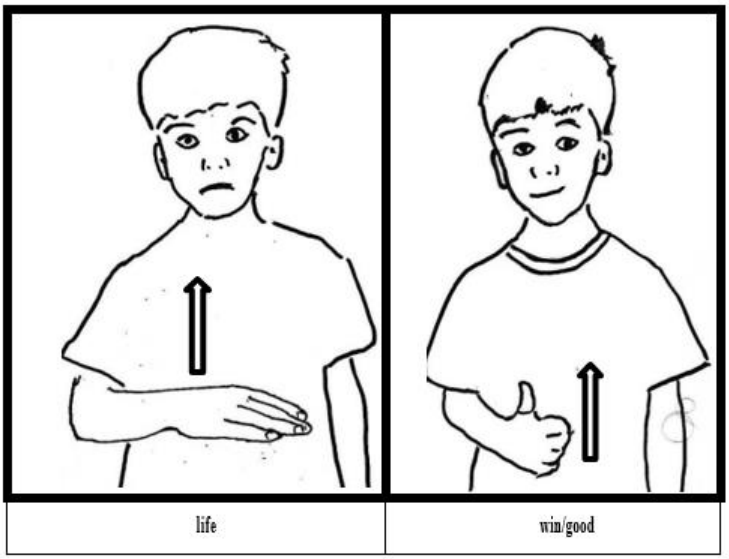


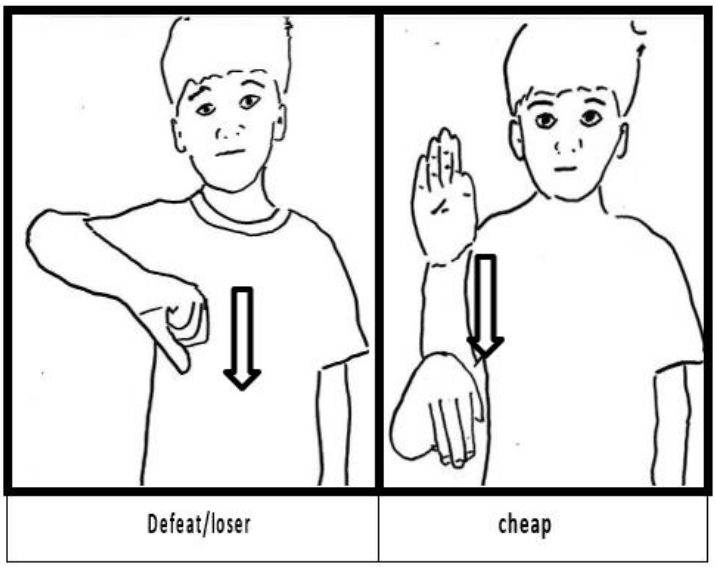
Natural Acquisition of Alphabet Spelling

Alphabet spelling refers to the set of symbols that make up the written alphabet. It represents the written form of spoken words in sentences, providing an accurate representation of spoken language through spelling. Children who acquire Kuwaiti Sign Language (KSL) can produce and comprehend alphabet spelling at an early age. According to Padden & Le Master (1985) and Padden (1996), children raised in a natural environment for acquiring sign language begin using alphabet spelling and typically develop the ability to produce sequential alphabet spelling by around the age of three.

William (1976) documented the emergence of written letter synchrony and coordination with alphabet spelling around the twenty-fifth month of child's life. Bienvenu (1994) observed that spelling the alphabet facilitated an early appearance of mastery in alphabet usage among non-deaf children who used sign language. We conclude from this information that the acquisition of alphabetic spelling provides an early acquisition of information and an alphabetic representation of letters. Similarly, the acquisition of sign language words and their meanings

offers a pathway to understanding the meanings of Arabic words. All spoken and signed languages use space-related words or movements to figuratively describe concepts that are not physically located in space. Sign languages, in particular, can show spatial relationships to convey value: upward movements often signify positive concepts such as life, winning, and goodness, while downward movements tend to represent negative concepts.





The set of rules and verbs that form words in sign language are not like those found in Modern Standard Arabic. Several reasons form the basis of the traditional view that signs are images. This perception arises because sign language is visual and includes space, volume, and form, which represent things holistically and directly, much like a picture or drawing. While signs do share similarities with images, stopping at this comparison overlooks a critical point. Saying that signs are like images is like saying speech is like music. A study by Valli and Lucas (1996) found that hearing children of deaf parents were fluent in both sign language and spoken language.

They were able to read the same story in both languages. It is often believed that reading in sign language takes longer than in spoken language because producing signs involves moving large body parts, such as limbs, compared to the smaller movements of the mouth when speaking. This assumption is partially correct; however, it does not tell the whole story.

Although individual signs may take longer to produce than spoken words, when reading a story in both languages, the overall time required can be similar. This brings us to the heart of the difference between sign languages and spoken languages.

The previous belief that sign language is inherently linked to its use of space and sight arises from several observations: its spatial expression of verbs and coordination (assigning roles to individuals and objects in sentences), its use of movement to convey the rise and fall of the voice (providing grammatical information about the timing and distribution of events), its integration of pronouns into verbs, and its reliance on facial expressions to carry syntactic information synchronized with sings. The lesson here is clear: we must study how deaf people use signs in the context of conversation and carefully analyze the details of how signs function. Nonetheless, A word of caution: no one should attempt to invent or compose a sign independently without consulting the deaf community (e.g., the sign of family, which originates from American Sign Language).

Breaking down signs into components has allowed researchers to develop new theories about how sign languages work and determine the best way to teach students. In good faith, a committee was formed years ago, comprising both deaf individuals and sign languages interpreters from Arab countries, to create a dictionary of Arabic sign language to facilitate communication amongst the deaf. The primary goal of this initiative was to unify sign languages across Arab countries, reconcile their differences, and ensure they are considered equal in importance to the Arabic spoken language. The committee's main principle was to identify Arabic vocabulary words that lacked a corresponding sign or had an unsuitable sign (as determined by the supervisory committee) and then select the "best" sign.

As for words without any existing synonym in sign language, it was necessary to create a new sign. The dictionary makers also introduced a set of grammatical signs, aligned with the rules of the Arabic language. However, if they had explored the original sign languages more thoroughly, they might have discovered existing grammatical structures that could have spared them the need for such extensive search. Supporters of the principle of assigning one sign for each spoken word believe that it will not only improve ordinary individuals' ability to learn sign language and speech simultaneously but also help deaf children learn the Arabic language. However, this is flawed for several reasons. One key issue is that it deprives deaf children of the rich synonymous vocabulary that all languages possess and denies them access to the linguistic heritage passed down through generations, distorting their original language.

Historical evidence from the United States, Sweden, and Denmark shows similar results when efforts were made to force sign language to conform to spoken language (Mahshie, 1995). Individuals interested in communicating with the deaf will likely find that what they learn in evening classes or other settings is insufficient and impractical for real – life communication. Furthermore, the method known as "Unified Arabic Sign," which uses mixed signs, creates a barrier. Users of this method often fail to understand deaf individuals or effectively integrate into the deaf community. In Kuwait and other countries, expectations regarding the competence of teachers using this approach have led to disappointment amongst the deaf population. Even if the classrooms improve and the students show proficiency in Arabic, the results remain unsatisfactory, and deaf education continues to fall short of success.

Spoken languages and sign languages differ fundamentally, not only in structure but also in how they are perceived. Spoken languages are primarily received audibly and organized sequentially, as words are processed one after another. In contrast, sign languages rely on visual perception, where information is often conveyed simultaneously. Spoken languages are mainly organized temporarily, with information conveyed sequentially as words follow one another over time. Similarly, sign languages also exhibit temporal organization but are largely

organized simultaneously. In sign languages, different parts of the body coordinate their movements, often presenting information in multiple layers. This simultaneous production of information aligns with the visual nature of sign language, enabling comprehension through visual sensation.

However, challenges arise when sign languages are influenced by spoken languages. Signs are often produced sequentially, mirroring the principle of one word following another in spoken languages. This approach exposes the visual system to information that may not align with its typical mode of processing. For deaf individuals, receiving linguistic information through signs alongside spoken language can lead to significant conflicts. Many words do not translate effectively into signs, and some signs are accompanied by unclear or poorly produced speech. As a result, the transmitted information may become ambiguous or contradictory with clarity issues in sentence. Furthermore, crucial linguistic features such as intonation, tone, and pauses which help clarify relationships between words in spoken language are absent in visual only communication. This absence makes it challenging to accurately interpret the intended meaning.

The simultaneous and sequential nature of signs, combined with the need to relate them to spoken language, creates difficulties in translating the relationship between words, signs, and their meaning. Consequently, understanding complex sentences or phrases often becomes a daunting task for the recipient. The task of communication is easier when the message is short and simple rather than complex. and perhaps this explains that using sign language with speech gives the impression that the process is going well at first, especially, with young deaf children in kindergarten and first primary school. This may explain why using sign language alongside speech often creates the impression that communication is progressing well, especially with young deaf children in kindergarten and early primary school. For younger children, shorter durations of communication simplify information transfer, making it easier for them to comprehend.

However, a child's ability to use signs sequentially does not necessarily reflect their knowledge of spoken language. What the child does is use sign language slowly and distinctly, adapting it in a simplified way to communicate with people unfamiliar with Kuwaiti Sign Language. This is in contrast to the verbal strategies typically used when trying to understand spoken communication. The child does not inherently know the spoken language. The simultaneous use of lip movements with signs and sometimes the production of sounds is not evidence of child's mastery of spoken language. Instead, the child's lip movements often mimic speech in an attempt to imitate rather than communication in Arabic. This imitation, rather than comprehension, may mislead teachers into thinking the child knows and uses the Arabic language. in reality, the child is merely imitating the lip movements associated with speech.

The Language of Reading and Writing

A deaf child may develop a reading style that pleases the teacher but lacks true comprehension. For example, the child might use signs for each word in a text, moving their lips, and produces sounds. While this appears to the teacher as evidence of Arabic language usage, the child may not derive any real meaning from the written sentences. For the child, the text is complete when signed, even if its written meaning is unclear. The language of the broad society is viewed as an addition to sign language and not as a substitute. The two languages are complementary rather than competitive or threatening to each other. This perspective can enhance learning of both languages, particularly written skills, which are essential for deaf individuals to participate fully in society through literature, newspapers, magazines, official documents, and more.

The deaf individual can also include the society in his society, culture, and traditions through written language. Further, the deaf can also engage the community with his or her society, cultural life, and traditions through written language. Previous education and lip-reading have increased the participation of many deaf people in society, and therefore, the increase in their opportunities for this type of participation is clear and certain. In conclusion, the need for a strong control of the written Arabic language is equally important for the deaf individual as it is for the hearing individual. The functional use of writing is the same for both groups. However, the key difference lies in the fact that deaf individuals rely on a different language, sign language, while spoken language is used by hearing individuals. Despite this, the written language remains a shared medium. In this context, Kuwaiti Sign Language serves the same function purpose for the deaf as spoken language does also play a critical role in other functions of language, such as participating in interviews, attending schools, and more.

To support the deaf community effectively, KSL must be recognized as equivalent to spoken language, free from societal restrictions stemming from a lack of awareness among teachers and others working with the deaf. Promoting the use of KSL will help ensure its accessibility and establish its parity with spoken language, not just for developing communication processes but for applying it in any context. Additionally, interpreters must be provided to assist deaf individuals in all situations. Bilingual education for deaf students should not only focus on teaching deaf children but also include training for teachers and anyone involved in their education. The ultimate goal is to prioritize written language over spoken language when setting educational objectives for the deaf. By using Kuwaiti Sign Language as a foundation, we can teach the deaf the written language of the surrounding community more effectively.

Conclusion

Despite misconceptions about sign language, both within Kuwait and the broader Arab world, Kuwaiti Sign Language (KSL) is a fully developed and independent language, with its own grammatical rules, structure, and linguistic complexity. This misconception has contributed to ongoing challenges in deaf education, particularly in efforts to integrate sign language with Arabic literacy without undermining the linguistic integrity of KSL. Lastly, promoting KSL in education, policy, and public discourse will not only empower the deaf community but also enrich the Kuwaiti society as a whole by embracing linguistic diversity and accessibility.

References

Battison. M.A. (1978). *Lexical Borrowing in ASL. Silver spring MD*. Linstok Press.

Bienvenu. M. (1994). *Implementation of A Bilingual/Bicultural Program: The Obstacle and How to Overcome Them.* Pannel Presentation at the 28th Annual Convention of Teachers of English to Speak pf Other Languages. Inc. Baltimore MD.

Cummins. J. (1984) B*ilingualism and Special Education: Issues in Assessment and Pedagogy*. Multlingual matters. UK.

Mahshie. S. N. (1995). *Educating Deaf Children Bilingually. Gallaudet University*. Washington DC.

Padden. C. Le Master. B. (1985). *An Alphabet on Hand: The Acquisition of Fingerspelling in Deaf Children*. Sign Language Studies. No.47.

Valli. C. Ceil Lucas. C (1996) *Linguistics of American Sign Language: an introduction*. Gallaudet University. Washington DC.

Williams. J.S. (1976). *Bilingual Experience of a Deaf Child*. Sign Language.