

# Investigating Media Accessibility for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Iraq

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## Abstract

Media accessibility, (MA) for short, is still largely uncharted research territory in the Translation Studies scene in Iraq. To examine the status quo of media accessibility for the (DHH) community, this study has three aims to address: first, to subject the Iraqi constitution to a thematic analysis to highlight the legal status of media accessibility; second, to examine the real actions taken by the government and non-governmental organizations to ensure that the d/Deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) can access this service; third, to probe the DHH community's reception and their level of expectations towards the available (MA) service. The findings suggest that the Constitution of the Republic of Iraq contains Articles that refer directly to rights of people with special needs to access the public service, but no reference to the right of media accessibility (MA) is identified. The study also shows that sign language interpreting (SLI), though scarcely employed in very few TV channels, has been the only audiovisual modality available for DHH viewers to access TV news whereas subtitling for the d/Deaf and hard of hearing (SDH) modality has never been implemented.

**Keywords:** Media Accessibility, The Deaf and Hard of Hearing Community in Iraq, Iraqi Sign Language, Subtitling for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing, Sign Language Interpreting

## 1. Introduction

Physically-impaired people are “those who are incapable to meet the needs of an average individual living on their own due to a part or whole deficiency” (United Nations Human Rights, 1975). For this reason, many countries from around the world as well as non-governmental human rights organizations have enacted laws and initiated training programmes to help integrate a category of sensory-impaired people within society and help them to live as other normal people, irrespective of differences related to their color, sex, language, religion or political views. There is no doubt that technology advancements have increasingly made the availability/ and use of online platforms and screens easy to access AV materials everywhere and at any time; however, the (DHH) community still have a close-to-non-existent accessibility to these AV materials in the Iraqi scene. This could be due to the absence of information in accessible formats. In the Iraqi scene, unfortunately, research in this particular topic is still scarce, especially when it comes to media accessibility for the people with hearing impairment. For this purpose, the current study is a preliminary step in the attempt to probe the field much further and to encourage comprehensive and in-depth research to establish standards and guidelines for Media Accessibility (MA) in Iraq. The other aim of the article is to shed light on this under-researched area within the scope of translation studies in the Iraqi scene. The study's findings are significant in that they investigate the barriers to media accessibility in Iraq and propose initial recommendations to address them; the findings can also be considered as an impetus for more governmental care directed towards this minority group by urging national TV channels and other media institutions to add intralingual translation to their various programs and platforms.

## 2. Media Accessibility (MA)

Media accessibility (MA) is “any access form for any type of need, arising due to any linguistic, sensory, cognitive and intellectual barrier, on behalf of the end user of an audiovisual product” (Hakamoond & Khoshsaligheh, 2018). Other researchers such as Díaz-Cintas, Orero, and Remael (2007) define “audiovisual accessibility” as ‘any activities which aim to ensure equal accessibility of audiovisual media to all users’. Overall, in various countries, accessibility has been considered a legal and technical national issue with an aim to ensure that all physically-impaired persons can have, as other normal people, an access to adequately use and enjoy the transport means in addition to other physical and cultural facilities. Recently, with the increasing daily usage of computer and telecommunications advancements, accessibility has also become an important issue; the view is to augment as adequate and efficient as possible the friendly usage of software, websites, telecommunication applications, and other widely-distributed AV media as it becomes urgent to cater for the needs of sensory-impaired users such as deaf and older people with sight problems. As a result of this, providing accessibility services for the hearing-impaired viewers such as subtitling (e.g. Szarkowska, Żbikowska, and Krejtz 2013 ) and audio-description for the visually-impaired (e.g., Luque & Soler Gallego 2018 ) have recently become a human-rights as well as a pressing legal issue in many countries and a fast thriving research area at the same time. In film production business, music, sounds, speakers IDs, and other audio features are important parts of movies used to create the needed atmospheric suspense, and to make the movies more enjoyable to watch, sensory-impaired viewers have the right to enjoy these important non-verbal film features as their normal-hearing pairs. For example, thriller movies in particular have some incidents that may require to include acoustic features combined with suprasegmental sounds such as intonation, background sounds, and other non-verbal features and audio elements necessary for the scenes to instigate the audience’s emotions and help them fully grasp the movie content, the atmosphere with all its suspense and motions. Hearing viewers can easily feel the atmosphere, understand the dialogue and enjoy the music, lyrics and other sound elements; for SDD viewers, the audiovisual content cannot be inferred from the screen or the context, they must make great effort to access the audiovisual information relying on the image and subtitles to assimilate the conveyed information. However, feeling under pressure of constrained space and time in the soundscape they operate in (Miquel Iriarte, 2017), subtitlers tend to condense information and include only the most relevant sounds SDD viewers need to understand the movie. For this reason, paid movies and online streaming platforms such as Netflix play a significant role in increasing the accessibility for its viewers such as people with hearing impairment. Among the techniques used is SDH which presents the dialogue as a text on the screen with additional para-linguistic and extra-linguistic information. To help integrate this minority group into their surrounding community, more attention should be paid to DHH people in terms of accessibility to audiovisual content which will improve their linguistic and cultural skills and reduce the causes of their isolation.

## 3. Accessibility Across the Region

Research studies indicate that employing SDH can effectively enhance the viewers’ comprehension and help retain knowledge more efficiently. This is helpful for people with hearing impairment and other normal viewers as well. Some countries like the US and the European Union have issued legislations to ensure that everyone has equal knowledge and entertainment accessibility; these laws oblige the media institutions to provide SDH for entertainment shows and online streaming material. Sadly, countries in the Arab world, their constitutions have no direct and comprehensive legislation to specifically govern and regulate the practice of subtitling for people with hearing and visual impairment. However, although the Arabs share one language and might encounter similar challenges related to this type of accessibility, each country has its own laws and regulations that govern accessibility for those people with visual and hearing impairments. Nevertheless, several Arab world countries have undertaken multiple initiatives all aim to help enhance accessibility for DHH. For example, in 2018, Egypt passed a legislation urging media entities to incorporate CC or adopting sign language interpretation in their TV shows. Similarly, in 2006, the United Arab Emirates enacted a national law to ensure the hearing-impaired people’s rights as the other normal people to access media services. According to this legislation, all government institutions have to introduce SDH or use sign language in all the media services. In Jordan, the constitution refers to DHH rights in Article 31. The legislation maintains that all radio- and television-aired programmes either by public or private organizations must have SDH or interpreted in sign language. In addition, and in order to offer the best media accessibility to services for the DHH, the Jordan Media Institute provides training courses and workshops on how to produce and adapt audiovisual content and make it accessible to those with visual/ auditory impairments.

### 3.1. People with Special Needs in Iraq: The Status Quo

In Iraq, DHH community, generally considered as a cultural-linguistic minority, have rarely been consulted on matters related to their daily life. This minority group, like other physically-impaired people, have suffered negligence by the authorities due to decades of armed conflict, terrorism, economic sanctions and social stigma. In comparison to other regional countries at least, Iraq is lagging behind in the media accessibility services introduced for its DHH people; however, this issue has recently been concentrated on, though in a limited scope. In a detailed report on the status quo of the people with impairments in Iraq, United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI)/ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2016a, *Report on the Rights of Person with Disabilities in Iraq*.

Statistically speaking, no current precise figures are available regarding the exact number of persons with visual and hearing impairments residing in Iraq. However, the current available statistics which range from 0.9 per cent to 8.4 per cent (WHO &

World Bank, 2011a) places Iraq “among the countries with the highest population of auditory and visually impaired people in the world, and there is a very high incidence of genetic deafness in the Middle Eastern region” (Disability Insider (2021)). The other two prevalent hearing impairments amongst both civilians and soldiers are hearing loss and tinnitus; these two disabilities are a result of war injuries such as blasts. However, some non-governmental bodies and disability advocates have higher statistics figures than actual official estimates and that Iraq’s estimate exceeds the global average which constitutes about 15% of the country’s total population.

#### 4. Method and Procedures

This section outlines the methods, which are quantitative and qualitative in nature, and the procedures used to collect the data. A previously designed 14-item English template of a questionnaire used in a published study (Shokooahmand & Khoshsaligheh, 2019) was adapted to the Iraqi context and used for a similar purpose but with a more limited target population. The study used a qualitative semi-structured one-to-one interviews to collect the data.

##### 4.1. Data Collection and DHH Community

A group of (40) DHH students both males and females in DhiQar school for the Deaf were interviewed with the help of two sign language interpreters, Mr. Hayder and Mr. Haythem. The participants gave their opinions on current media accessibility services. They were studying at a public primary school special for DHH students. With the help of the two sign language interpreters, an interview conducted for the (40) DHH participants (see figure 4); they were asked to fill in an 14-item questionnaire of five constructs, namely, (1) personal information, (2) their education level, (3) linguistic information, (4) history of the impairment, (5) their perception and assessment of the current audiovisual media accessibility services

##### 4.2. Legislation

This part of the study will present a thematic analysis for the Constitution of the Republic of Iraq (came into force in 1925; amended in 2005). The constitution has a direct reference to the rights of this category of physically-impaired people. ‘Law 38 of 2013 on the Care of Persons with Disabilities and Special Needs’ defines this category of people as those who ‘have a malfunction in performing their role or tasks in education, sport, in the professional environment or in the context of family relations, in comparison with their peers of the same age and socio-economic background’ (Art. 1 [ii]). The law has turned the spotlight on disability issues and aims to raise awareness among public to this category of people and to provide them with equal opportunities as normal peers. Further, the first paragraph of Article (3) of Law No. 38 of 2013, stated that: “to develop plans and programs to ensure the rights of persons with disabilities and special needs in accordance with the provisions of international law, conventions and covenants to which the Republic of Iraq is a party”. As a result, a Commission has been established to ensure the promotion and protection of the rights of physically and sensory-impaired people. Also, Article 32 of the Iraqi Constitution states that “the State shall care for the handicapped and those with special needs, and shall ensure their rehabilitation in order to reintegrate them into society, and this shall be regulated by law”. Nevertheless, the ambitions and needs of this category of impaired people have not met as the Federal Law on disabilities No. 38 did not use the right-based approach but rather a welfare approach. The Federal Law also failed to achieve the desired harmony with the principles, provisions and purpose of the Convention as a whole. Unfortunately, the important issue remains as this minority-impaired people continue facing barriers to access the public facilities that are available for all and they are blocked to practice their right as other normal citizens and also being directly and indirectly discriminated against when they attempt to access public services.

##### 4.3. Actions

This section will outline the main initiatives and research projects conducted so far to help the DHH in inclusion policy and to have easy access to audiovisual content.

##### 4.3.1 Initiatives by National and International NGOs

Most of the studies conducted so far by the international NGOs such as International Disability Alliance, UK aid from the British People have addressed educational issues related to students with disabilities. For example, to alleviate their sufferings and help them integrate into community around them, the British Council in Iraq carried out a study in eight provinces (see figure 1) focusing on the available practices and training workshops for sign language. These training workshops directed to highlight the implemented policies, or existing regulations in schools or classrooms and the main challenges facing inclusion and equality in education in Iraq.

Another project funded by the Australian Government and administrated by The International Organization for Migration (IOM) Iraq in 2019; it was entitled ‘Supporting Durable Solutions, Social Cohesion and Reintegration in Iraq’. Based on that, the IOM Iraq launched the “Disability Inclusion Strategy 2019—2021”, which laid some solid foundations for disability inclusive practices and programming. Another project followed in 2022, IOM Iraq Country Strategy 2022-2024 and IOM Iraq Disability Inclusion Strategy 2022-2024 was also launched, with the latter focusing on increased accountability for reducing barriers experienced by people with sensory impairments (see figure 2).



**Figure 1: training workshop for sign language interpreters**



**Figure 2: Training workshop on Sign Language**

Local entities have also contributed with launching some initiatives though on a limited scope. For instance, Imam Husain Holy Shrine Foundation, with the help of local sign language interpreters helped to compile a dictionary for the religious terms for the people with sensory impairments which is the first of its kind in Iraq (see figure 3). Hussein Specialist Centre for the Deaf launched many training workshops for sign language interpreters.



**Figure 3: SL dictionary for religious terms**

#### 4.3.2. Sign Language Interpreted Audiovisual Products

As a driving force, technology has redefined the contours of human interaction. Over the last few decades, technological advances have significantly changed how we communicate. After 2003, Iraq witnessed the launch of tens of satellite TV channels and internet platforms; an increasing subtitled and dubbed flow of foreign AV content have entered the country. However, the first state-owned channel (Al Iraqiya TV channel) began broadcasting the news with Sign Language SLI) (see figure 4). The latter appears almost similar to Levantine Arabic Sign Language- the common sign language of Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Jordan. Al-Forat is another news channel which starts broadcasting the news for DHH though to a limited

duration. However, the International Disability Alliance (IDA) report refers to the “(a) The lack of official recognition of Iraqi sign language, the insufficient number of vocational training programmes in sign language interpretation and the limited involvement of persons with disabilities in the teaching of sign language and in the certification of sign language interpreter” as well as “(c) The inaccessibility of most television programmes and websites”. To overcome these drawbacks, governments and human rights organizations should follow, design and implement definite policies to promote DHH integration into their community. Among these policies is a public media programs aimed at raising awareness on the rights of sensory-impaired people; the media campaign can help fight all kinds of discrimination against this cultural-linguistic minority.



**Figure 4: Sign-language interpreting in Al-Iraqiya TV channel**

#### 4.3.3. SDH on Audiovisual Products

The dubbing and subtitling are the two main audiovisual translation modes mostly used to translate foreign AV products aired on TV in Iraq. Almost all Turkish or Iranian TV series, documentaries, reports broadcasted on TV or the cinema are all dubbed into Arabic, while English movies are mostly subtitled. That means all those AV productions are beyond the reach of DHH. SDH, mostly meaning intralingual subtitling (Szarkowska 2013), is nonexistent in Iraqi TV broadcasting. According to International Disability Alliance (IDA), the Committee expressed concern about the “(b) The insufficient provision of information and communications technologies and of information in accessible formats such as Easy Read, plain language, captioning, sign language, Braille, audio-description and tactile, augmentative and alternative means of communication”. Thus, in Iraq, sensory-impaired people have no access AV content through SDH or sign language as their normal peers.

#### 4.4. Reception

To have effective results, DHH community needs to be consulted if policy makers and programs aimed at checking at the availability, accessibility of information and media services. The deaf community have experienced barriers and have identified solutions which can have significant impact on the all programs that assist them in Media Accessibility. Although there is no up-to-date statistical information regarding the number of deaf people in Dhi-Qar province, Association of the Deaf community claims (via personal contact) that there are about 500 deaf people officially registered. Unfortunately, Deaf people in rural areas, especially females, cannot be reached for many reasons.



**Figure 5: DHH responding to our interview questions by using sign language**





**Figure 6: participants responding to our interview questions**

#### 4.4.1. Survey Study

This section has two main objectives to address. First, it assesses the current MA services available in the Iraqi scene and how the DHH people assess them. A representative sample of (40) DHH people in Dhi-Qar province participated in this study (see figure 5); they were asked to express their opinions on a multiple-choice question (suggested responses: not at all, slightly, moderately, significantly, no answer). As there has been a scarcity of research conducted so far on the DHH people's perception towards the actions taken in the area of media accessibility in Iraq (see appendix), the current study could help fill in this gap and pave the way for future research in this area.

Dhi-Qar Deaf School, where the study was carried out, provided us with all the factual information needed for the current study as the students had already provided the school with their information at the registration day. The first 10 questions cover the participants' ages, level of education, degree of deafness, etc.) of the (40) DHH participants (see figures 5 & 6). The majority of the DHH students were females: 28 (70%) were females and 12 (30%) were males; their ages range from 9 to above 17 years old (see appendix). All participants in the study had some degree of deafness; it was mild in 2 (20%), moderate in 15 (37.5%), severe in 17 (42.5%), and profound in 6 (15%) participants. Almost all of the deaf participants in this study have been deaf from birth for genetic reasons (as provided by school). Although the department of health provided them with hearing aids, 38 (95%) respondents made no use of these aids, only 2 (20%) participants use these aids.

As for their education, the Deaf primary school starts admitting students from the age of 9. So, all the participants are at the primary education level. Regrettably, all the students, once they finish their primary education, do not progress to middle school and then high school as Dhi-Qar province has no such schools at the moment for people with special needs, an aim which the current study tries to shed light on. Regarding local sign language proficiency, most participants 30 (75%), in all the four levels of deafness, described themselves as "Intermediate" while 17 (42.5%) and 26 (65%) participants described themselves as "Beginner" and "Advanced" respectively.

As for proficiency in 'lip reading', over 50% of the participants assess their proficiency as "Intermediate", out of whom 1 (2.5%) was mildly deaf, 5 (12.5%) moderately deaf, 19 (47.5%) severely deaf, and 27 (67.5%) profoundly deaf.

Concerning the participants' reading proficiency, their levels vary according to their education level. Participants at the last two grades described their proficiency as 'intermediate', 25 (62.5%) and 14 (35%) of the volunteers assessed their reading skill as 'beginner'.

The last four questions required participants to give their opinions on the actions taken so far by the Iraqi government to provide and enhance the media accessibility and whether these actions have met their expectations or not. Answering a Likert scale question (from not at all to very significantly), all participants declared that the current condition could 'slightly meet their expectations. They felt deeply frustrated at the level of media accessibility services introduced. Sign language, SDH are almost close to non-existent in Iraq. They cannot enjoy the AV content aired in TV channels as their normal peers.

## 5. Conclusions

This study aims to explore the current state of Media Accessibility (MA) for Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) community in Iraq. It tackles this neglected research area on three strands: legislation, actions, and reception.

The current article reached some significant findings: little is known about Media Accessibility in the Iraqi scene and further research is required to explore this fertile research area. Also, accessible audiovisual content on TV is insufficient and only limited to news forecasts aired for short periods; although media legislation urges state TV channels to use SLI in their audiovisual content, the reality is that none of these channels adopt it in their aired programmes. The ultimate aim of all MA workshops, courses and programmes is to integrate the DHH with their surrounding community and make them feel that they

are active members. For this end, Iraqi authorities, as Iraq joined the international conventions, should work hard to integrate sensory-impaired people and enable them in terms of media accessibility to audiovisual content as other normal peers; this can be achieved by delivering high-quality SDH to AV content that incorporates both linguistic and paralinguistic information to DHH viewers in order to enhance their viewing experience. This would definitely improve their linguistic and cultural skills.

In terms of legislation, the constitution has no direct reference to the sensory-impaired people's right in media accessibility, and hence it seems obvious that Iraq has no clear and adequate strategies to tackle media accessibility issue. Almost all the satellite TV channels have no (SLI) or (SDH) services; so AT content aired certainly not accessible for people with hearing disabilities.

The study also concludes that narrow scope of media accessibility opportunities available in the Iraqi institutes such as universities, public libraries and governmental and nongovernmental agencies lead to a sharp deterioration in accessibility not only limited to health, transport, and other sectors but include other areas related to modern technological facilities and use of the Internet. The almost completely absent MA content accessibility creates a real challenge to sensory-impaired people as it deprives them of their rights as other normal people to access the various electronic information and services which are available for all.

## 6. Recommendations

1. The Government should pass a media accessibility legislation to ensure fair and equal accessibility for the DHH community; and also raise awareness by naming the Year of Accessibility. Also, constitutional amendments to national laws need to be implemented to promote the rights of sensory-impaired people to have sufficient media content accessibility.

2. In order to create a sufficient and efficient accessibility to media content for the (DHH) community, all public and private bodies including universities, scientific institutes, libraries and companies should work in close cooperation, partnership and consultation with sensory-impaired people to include technical and electronic aspects in their strategies, plans and programs related to people with sensory disabilities, in terms of modifying computer and communication and other electronic devices, and designing pages and websites.

3. This small-scale research can be considered as a first step on Media Accessibility studies in the Iraqi scene; it hopes to inspire more research on this fast thriving research area, especially subtitling for the Deaf and the Hard-of-hearing (SDH), on creating educational and pedagogic materials for Iraqi Deaf community, SL interpreters, and trainers.

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## Appendix

### Questionnaire

Please choose only one answer for each question.

1. What is your gender? 1. Female ( )                      2. Male ( )	2. Which city/town do you live in? 1. Nasiriya ( )                      2. Other ( )
3. How old are you? 1. 13-17 ( )                      2. 18-29 ( ) 3. 30-39 ( )                      4. 40-49 ( ) 5. 50-59 ( )                      6. 60-69 ( ) 7. Over 70 ( )	4. What is your education level? 1. Primary school ( )    2. Secondary school ( ) 3. High school ( )        4. University ( )
5. Which type of school did/do you study in? 1. Mainstream school ( )    2. Deaf school ( )	6. What is your degree of hearing loss? 1. Mild deafness ( )    2. Moderate deafness ( ) 3. Severe deafness ( )    4. Profound deafness ( )
7. How did you become deaf or hard of hearing? 1. Genetically ( )            2. Non-genetically ( )	8. How old were you when you became deaf or hard of hearing? 1. Congenital ( ) 2. Before 2 years old ( ) 3. Between 2-4 years old ( ) 4. Between 5-10 years old ( ) 5. Between 10-15 years old ( ) 6. Between 15- 20 years old ( ) 7. Above 20 years old ( )
9. Do you use any hearing devices or implants? 1. Hearing aid ( )            2. Cochlear Implant ( ) 3. None ( )	10. Do you use any eye devices? 1. Glasses ( )                2. Contact lens ( ) 3. None ( )
11. How do you assess your level of sign language proficiency? 1. Beginner ( )                2. Intermediate ( ) 3. Advanced ( )                4. None ( )	12. How do you assess your level of lip reading proficiency? 1. Beginner ( )                2. Intermediate ( ) 3. Advanced ( )                4. None ( )



13. How do you assess your reading proficiency?	14. Are your needs and expectations fulfilled with the current media accessibility?  1. Not at all ( )                      2. Slightly ( ) 3. Moderately ( )                      4. Significantly ( )
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