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Noventa e Dois Por Cento de Quê: Mãos robóticas de língua gestual em salas de aula quenianas, e as evidências que um comprador de educação pública deve exigir antes de expandir

Heather Grizzle · 11 de setembro de 2026

Mãos robóticas sinalizando em salas de aula no Quénia: o que a cobertura da ZeroBionic revela, o que os 92 por cento poderão medir, e as evidências que os compradores precisam antes de escalar.

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Robotic signing hands in Kenyan classrooms, and the evidence a public education buyer should expect before scale

On 9 September 2026, Agence France-Presse carried a report from a Nairobi secondary school for Deaf students on ZeroBionic, a Kenyan start-up whose 3D-printed robotic hands convert a teacher's speech into signs in real time. Within two days the wire story had been republished in Japan, Taiwan, Thailand and Bangladesh and across Kenyan and pan-African outlets, and rewritten by aggregators for audiences with no particular connection to Deaf education. The coverage is warm, and much of what it describes deserves attention. A company founded by a young Kenyan engineer has built signing hardware locally from recycled plastic, priced it at roughly $350 per unit, and involved Deaf teachers in capturing sign data through sensor bodysuits. It has moved sign language technology off the screen and into a physical object placed in a classroom, which is a materially different proposition from the avatar and video products that dominate the field elsewhere. A 19-year-old student quoted in the report said the technology gives her "hope for the future." That testimony should be taken seriously, and so should the question of what stands behind it.

The coverage carries a single performance figure, a "92-percent speech-to-sign accuracy rate," and a deployment claim of 78 Kenyan schools. Both are now circulating internationally as settled facts. Neither is accompanied, in any report located for this analysis, by a description of what was measured, against what reference, by whom, or under what conditions. That gap is the subject of this piece. It is not an argument that the device fails, and nothing in the public record supports such a claim. It is an argument that the public record does not yet contain the evidence a ministry, county government, school board or donor would need before treating the device as a means of instruction for Deaf children, and that the press framing has in places made the gap harder to see.

What has actually been reported

The AFP report, as carried by Africanews and republished by The Business Standard, African Insider and Mwanzo TV, states that ZeroBionic was co-founded by Norah Kimathi, that the hands translate a teacher's spoken words into sign language in real time, that each unit costs about $350 and lasts up to two years, that the company has deployed in 78 Kenyan schools, and that the system achieves a 92 percent speech-to-sign accuracy rate. It reports that Deaf teachers are trialling bodysuits to record signs and build a database of technical terms drawing on English, American and Kenyan signing, and it cites the Kenya Society for Deaf Children for an estimate of roughly

300,000 Kenyan children with hearing impairment, of whom about 20,000 were enrolled in school as of 2024. Secondary rewrites have altered these particulars. Good News Network describes 78 units sold rather than 78 schools, and a service life of three years rather than two. An earlier TechCabal profile, published in July 2026, describes a later humanoid product called AF1 with a head, a face and a screen, reports bidirectional "speech to sign and sign to speech" capability, and cites 510,000 direct and indirect beneficiaries.

Taken one at a time these discrepancies are small, and some are probably artefacts of rewriting rather than inconsistency at source. Taken together they illustrate a pattern familiar across this field: the figures that matter most to a public buyer, namely the scale of deployment, the durability of the hardware and the quality of the output, are the figures least anchored to any primary document. The company's own materials do not settle these figures. A project listing ZeroBionic submitted to the Zero Project, an international database of disability-inclusion practice, states that it reached "over 500,000 students in 120 African schools and 9,500 students in 4 Swiss schools by 2024," and in the following paragraph that in 2024 partnerships expanded impact to "over 4,700 in 28 African schools." The two sentences may count different things, such as students reached indirectly and schools with installed units, but the listing does not say so, and neither figure reconciles with the 78 schools reported by AFP in 2026. The same listing states that the hand "translates in under 2 seconds with ≥92% accuracy." Neither the listing nor the company's website, as reviewed for this analysis, describes how the accuracy figure was produced.

A number without a denominator

"Speech-to-sign accuracy" is not a single quantity. A pipeline that takes a teacher's speech and drives a pair of mechanical hands involves at least three separable stages, each with its own failure modes. The first is recognising the spoken words, which in a Kenyan classroom means recognising English and possibly Kiswahili, spoken with varied accents, in rooms that are often acoustically poor. The second is mapping those words to a sequence of signs, which is translation between two languages with different grammars rather than the substitution of one token for another. The third is physically producing the signs with enough fidelity that a Deaf child recognises them. A figure of 92 percent could describe any one of these stages or some composite of them. It could describe the proportion of individual signs that an engineer judged correctly

formed, the proportion of sentences that Deaf students understood, or performance on a fixed list of test phrases around which the system was built. These readings differ greatly in what they tell a buyer.

Beneath any accuracy figure in this domain sit further questions. The reference standard matters: correct against which variety of signing, judged by whom, and with what level of agreement between judges. The test material matters: vocabulary the system was trained on, or unseen classroom speech of the kind a mathematics teacher actually produces over a forty-minute lesson. The distribution of error matters, because an eight percent error rate means something very different depending on whether the errors fall on incidental signs or on the technical term the lesson exists to teach. In a science classroom, a single wrongly produced sign for a concept can be the difference between a student learning the concept and learning something false with confidence, and an aggregate percentage cannot tell a buyer how often that happens. The company's listing adds that its dataset covers "over 9 million STEM-specific parameters," which is not a unit a buyer can interpret: it does not say how many signs, signers, sentences or hours of recorded signing the system has learned from. None of this implies the figure is wrong. It implies that, as reported, the figure cannot be evaluated, and a figure that cannot be evaluated should not be repeated as though it had been.

What hands can carry

There is a second limit on what any accuracy figure for this device could mean, and it is structural rather than evidentiary. Signed languages are not produced by the hands alone. Grammatical information in Kenyan Sign Language, as in every documented signed language, is carried by facial expression, head and eye movement, mouth patterns, torso orientation and the use of signing space, and questions, negation, conditionals and the marking of who did what to whom are frequently expressed partly or wholly through these non-manual channels. The World Federation of the Deaf and the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters made this point in their 2018 joint statement on signing avatars, observing that human signers use "the hands, arms, shoulders and torso, movements of the head, facial expression and mouth patterns," and concluding that accurate live interpretation through an avatar was not then possible.

A pair of robotic hands has access to a subset of these channels by design. That does not make the device useless. Manual vocabulary may still help a student who already

has a fluent signed language, for example by making technical terms visible during a spoken lesson. It does, however, bound what the device can be said to do. A system that signs with its hands can at most be accurate at producing manual signs; it cannot be accurate at producing Kenyan Sign Language in full, and a figure presented as "speech-to-sign accuracy" invites readers to assume the latter. The company's own work appears to recognise the constraint. AFP reports that the team uses "Africa One, a humanoid robot they built," to refine and expand the signs its hands can produce, and TechCabal describes a humanoid product with a head, a face and a screen; Good News Network, by contrast, describes Africa One as a future upper torso. That trajectory is to the company's credit, and it is also a reason to ask which hardware configuration the 92 percent figure and the 78-school deployment refer to.

Kenya has a signed language

Parts of the international coverage have described Kenya as lacking a standardised signed language. That framing should not be repeated without qualification, and it is worth being precise about where it came from. Article 7(3)(b) of the Constitution of Kenya directs the State to "promote the development and use of indigenous languages, Kenyan Sign language, Braille and other communication formats and technologies accessible to persons with disabilities," and Article 120 makes Kenyan Sign Language one of the official languages of Parliament alongside Kiswahili and English. The Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development publishes Kenyan Sign Language curriculum designs for Deaf learners under the competency-based curriculum. On 24 June 2026 the National Assembly passed, with amendments, the Kenyan Sign Language Bill, 2023 (Senate Bill No. 9 of 2023), which would establish a Kenya Sign Language Council to regulate, develop and preserve the language, integrate KSL into early childhood and basic education curricula, and create a registration and licensing framework for interpreters. The Bill is not yet law. As of 11 September 2026, the Senate's bills tracker records it as referred back to the Senate, with the National Assembly's amendments "awaiting consideration by the Senate."

The AFP report is more careful than its descendants. The quotation it attributes to Kimathi concerns data: "in Africa we don't have a standardised African sign language dataset." That is a claim about the absence of machine-readable resources, and it is broadly accurate for most African signed languages. It is a different claim from the absence of a standard language. Regional variation within KSL is documented, as it is

within American Sign Language and British Sign Language, and variation is not absence. The wire text does not say that Kenya lacks a standard signed language. It says that many Deaf children in Kenya learn "a patchwork of makeshift signs," and that "the local dialect lacks many technical terms used to teach subjects like maths and biology." The first observation describes a problem of access to fluent language models and qualified teachers, which is the problem the Kenyan legislation is designed to address. The second is a real vocabulary gap, though describing a constitutionally recognised language as a "local dialect" is itself a framing that should not travel further. Conflating these three things, a data gap, ordinary dialectal variation and inadequate provision of teaching, into a story about a country without a language does two kinds of harm. It misdescribes linguistic rights that Kenyan Deaf people have already secured, and it quietly enlarges the space a technology company can occupy by implying that it is filling a vacuum rather than working inside an existing language with its own institutions.

Who decides what a sign is

That point has a concrete consequence. According to the AFP report, Deaf teachers are recording signs in a bodysuit, and in the process the team is "building a database of technical terms" drawing on English, American and Kenyan signs that is "helping to expand the language." The wire presents this as a benefit, and it may be one. It is also a description of a private company adding vocabulary to a national language. The report does not say what "English" means in this context; it could refer to British Sign Language, to a manually coded form of English, or to fingerspelled English words. On any of those readings, the database is making choices about which signs Kenyan Deaf children will see for concepts in mathematics and science, and some of those choices appear to involve importing signs from languages other than KSL.

Borrowing is normal in every living language, and gaps in technical vocabulary are real in many signed languages. The coinage and standardisation of technical terminology is nonetheless a language-planning decision, and in Kenya it is one the pending legislation would place with a statutory council. When that decision is made inside a device's training data, questions follow that the public record does not answer. Who approved each technical sign, and were Deaf KSL users among the approvers with authority to reject a sign rather than only to perform it? Were the Deaf teachers whose movements were captured credited, compensated and told how their recorded motion

would be stored and reused, given that signing data is identifying data about the signer? Once a sign has been embedded in hardware deployed across dozens of schools, what route exists for the Kenyan Deaf community to have it corrected? The Zero Project listing states that the dataset was "curated in collaboration with local DPOs and bilingual education consultants" and that the system "adapts to local sign dialects using machine learning." The first is encouraging, though the organisations are not named and their role is not described. The second sharpens the governance question, because a system that adapts its signing to local variation by machine learning is making linguistic choices continuously rather than once. Drawing the data from Deaf teachers is the right instinct, and it is more than many sign language AI projects have done. The evidentiary question is whether their involvement extends to decisions or stops at capture.

The classroom removes the safety net

The weight of these questions depends on deployment context, and the context described in the coverage is among the highest-stakes uses a sign language technology can have. The stated value of the device is that it allows teachers who do not sign to instruct Deaf students. In that configuration there is, by design, no fluent adult signer in the room to notice when the output is wrong. Errors are not caught by an interpreter or corrected by the teacher; they are received by children, some of whom, on the figures the coverage itself cites, may be acquiring a first language late and incompletely. A mistranslated term in a news broadcast is a failure of access. A mistranslated term in a child's science lesson, repeated daily, is a failure of education that the child has no means to detect.

The device is also, as reported, one-directional in its primary form. The teacher speaks and the hands sign, and a Deaf student's question, disagreement or confusion must return by some other route. TechCabal's account of students pointing to a screen suggests the company has considered this, but classroom learning is interactive, and a channel that carries instruction fully in one direction and response only partially in the other shapes what a Deaf student is able to do in that room.

There is, finally, a policy question that no product can answer on its own behalf. Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which Kenya ratified in 2008, requires States Parties to facilitate "the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community," to ensure that the educa-

tion of Deaf children is delivered "in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual," and to take appropriate measures to employ teachers qualified in sign language. A $350 device that lets a non-signing teacher deliver a lesson is attractive against the cost of training and employing signing teachers, and that attractiveness is exactly why the evidence matters. If the device supplements qualified teachers, the evidentiary bar is one thing. If it is procured in place of them, it is being asked to carry an obligation that belongs to the State, and the bar is considerably higher.

What credible evidence would look like

A wire story is not the venue for a validation study, and no start-up should be expected to publish one through the press. The appropriate test is whether the evidence exists and can be examined by the parties who need it. For a device intended for Deaf children's classrooms, a public education buyer should expect six things before deployment at scale.

1. A definition of the headline figure: which stage of the pipeline it measures, which metric, the size and source of the test set, whether the test material was unseen classroom speech, who judged correctness, how closely the judges agreed, and which hardware configuration was tested.
2. Evaluation by fluent Deaf KSL users, including Deaf teachers, with comprehension measured in students against a human signing comparator rather than inferred from the judged correctness of individual signs.
3. Plain disclosure of what the hardware cannot express, including non-manual grammar, together with a stated intended role that says whether the device supplements or replaces a signing teacher.
4. Lexicon governance: the provenance of each technical sign, the process by which it was approved, the route by which it can be corrected, and its relationship to existing KSL curricula and to Kenyan Deaf organisations, including the Kenya National Association of the Deaf.
5. Data governance for the motion-capture programme, covering consent, compensation, retention and reuse of the signers' recorded movement.



6. A deployment record: which schools, which configuration, over what period, with what independent classroom observation, and with a working channel through which Deaf students and teachers can report errors and see them fixed.

None of these requirements presumes the device is unsuitable. Sign language technology is not inherently unacceptable in a classroom; it has to be evidenced, and the evidence required rises with the stakes of the setting. That is the same standard NCG's Sign Language Access Trust (SLAT) Index applies to sign language AI generally. ZeroBionic has not been assessed under the Index, and nothing in this piece is a rating.

Os limites desta análise

This analysis rests on public press coverage, the company's website and its self-submitted Zero Project listing, and a small number of public legal and curricular documents. A description of the company's engineering on a professional networking profile was not relied on. NCG has had no contact with ZeroBionic, has not observed the device, and has not assessed it under any NCG instrument. The author is not a user of Kenyan Sign Language, and the questions raised here about KSL terminology, variation and classroom practice are ones that Kenyan Deaf people, their organisations and Kenyan Deaf educators are better placed to answer than any outside commentator. The AFP wire text was read as carried by Africanews; the Japan Times and France 24 versions were not accessible in full, and later rewrites were compared against the wire rather than relied on. If ZeroBionic has published evaluation material that was not located, the right response is to read it, and the questions above are offered as a frame for doing so. Absence of evidence in the public record is a finding about the record, not about the device.

The move from screen to hardware is real, and it changes the engineering problem considerably. It does not change the evidentiary one. A robotic hand in a classroom makes the same implicit promise as an avatar on a website, that what the Deaf person receives is what the hearing person said, and it makes that promise to children, in a setting where no one else in the room can check it. Ninety-two percent is a claim. What it is ninety-two percent of is the evidence.

Fontes

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TIPS

Know something about a sign language AI system that the public should know? Send it to tips@novaracg.com. Every tip is read by me and kept confidential. If you work in the UK, writing to us is not by itself a protected disclosure under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, so before you share employer information, check your options with Protect (protect-advice.org.uk), the free whistleblowing advice line.

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