

Challenges Visually Impaired Students Experienced in English Language Classrooms in Some Primary Schools of Debre Markos Town

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Abstract

The main purpose of the study was to assess the challenges that visually impaired primary school students experienced in their English language classes. The study followed qualitative approach and applied phenomenology design. The participants of the study were three English language teachers, five visually impaired students, two school directors, head of education office of the district, and one special need education expert in the education office of the zone. While the English language teachers were chosen using available sampling technique, and the rest of the participants were chosen purposively. The data gathering tools were observations, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. After data generation process, themes were identified to answer the research questions. Finally, the study revealed that students with visual impairment reflected that exclusionary practices are observed in teaching and testing in English language classes. They also mentioned that scarcity of resources affected their learning; they added that the schools lack facilities for students with visual impairments. The students claimed that they did not get relevant social support networks. Moreover, it is reported that English language syllabus lacks inclusive nature in addressing the learning needs of these students. In this endeavour, all stakeholders have to work together to support schools in making them relevant, friendly and attractive to provide inclusive education for all students. Experts and practitioners should reconsider gaps and address the instructional demands of students with visual impairment.

Keywords: English teaching, Challenges, Inclusive Classroom, Students with Visual Impairments

Introduction

There are many factors that affect the provision of English language teaching in educational environment. The major barriers observed in the Ethiopian schools were lack of trained teachers, rigid curriculum, unsafe school environment, limited budget, low awareness about people with disabilities, and lack of commitment of educational administrators (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2012, 2016).

The problems of students with visual impairment (SWVI) in schooling can be considered from the resources schools have, the practice of teachers, and the variables students bring towards learning (Temesgen, 2018). The schools are important in providing the necessary infrastructure, facilities, and resources (materials, man power, and finance. Teachers are expected to bring about their knowledge, skills and attitudes to handle the classes in the best professional practices in the schools. The students, on their part, bring their demographic factors, efforts and psychological elements to the schooling process.

When SWVI get access to visual information with the help of technology, their attention is shifted from struggling on access issue to getting knowledge. Thus, using assistive technologies in educational environments play essential role in offering instruction for SWVI with independence and motivation by increasing their capacity (Arslantas, 2017; Beal & Rosenblum, 2018; Hossain & Bhuiyan, 2013). For instance, Arslantas (2017) reported that SWVI writing skills and vocabulary study had been improved using supportive technology. This technology is also important not only for education but also for their work and life skills (Tesfatsion, 2015). Citing other researchers, Beal and Rosenblum (2018) reported that academic achievement of SWVI is generally lower than the sighted ones. Habulezi and Phasha (2012) mentioned a case in point in that many SWVI in Botswana could not join university due to poor academic performance. Similar problems were also observed in Ethiopian schools due to absence of support system for students according to their educational needs (Tesfatsion, 2015). Primarily this low achievement is related to the loss of vision as barriers to education in developing certain concepts, abstract learning, self-esteem, relation with others, access to educational elements, and many other personal problems (Eguavoen & Eniola, 2016; Tesfatsion, 2015). As people use their eyes to experience the social and physical environments, loss of vision highly affects the educational and other forms of developments (Paeddr & Finkova, 2012).

However, if they get the necessary support, these students are good at learning language like their sighted peers (Basaran, 2012). Even in some neuroscience studies, visually impaired groups outperformed sighted ones in memory functions (Arslantas, 2017). This high retention is attributed to the serious attention they give to auditory processing. The way they perceive the world and educational activities is different from the sighted ones (Basaran, 2012). Thus, they need a different approach in the teaching and learning process as they are different from their sighted friends and face serious difficulties and deficiencies due to their loss of vision (Kocyigit & Artar, 2015). When they are in an inclusive class, it is problematic for both the teachers and these students to address their educational needs due to certain factors. Some of these problems are lack of assistive technology, lack of resources, and lack of trained teachers (Morelle & Tabane, 2019; Ozer & Cabaroglu, 2018; Sikanku, 2018).

Other researchers reported that a visual presentation of language instruction improves memory, comprehension, and inference of students (Clark & Paivio, 1991; Knauff & May 2006; Venkatasamy, 2016). As long term memory is reported to store information in visual (scene) and verbal (meaning) forms, sighted students are in a better advantage over visually impaired groups to understand language contents in relation with visual and non-verbal forms (Venkatasamy, 2016).

Kocyigit and Artar (2015) also reported that in learning a foreign language, most of the time people use their visual and auditory senses. Thus, the use of learning materials and teaching techniques which appeal to vision and listening are essential (Ozer & Cabaroglu, 2018), but students face learning deficiency when they lose their vision. For instance, English textbooks are published using various colours to attract student's attention in raising their motivation, understanding and memory. Reading and writing activities bring barriers to visually impaired students if they are not supported by alternative techniques using assistive technology (Hossain & Bhuiyan, 2013). Therefore, if students with visual impairment are not in conducive learning environment in their English classes, they will not be successful in their progress. Thus, this area should be a research focus to address the learning challenges of students with visual impairment. English language is given due emphasis in Ethiopia for it serves as medium of instruction in the secondary and tertiary levels of education and is the primary means of international

communication. It is also studied as a subject from primary to tertiary levels. Thus, the English proficiency of SWVI plays a critical role in their academic lives.

As the study of English should be supported by visual sense to understand the concrete and abstract meanings of words, phrases and sentences, as well as to develop skills of thinking, visually impaired students will be in a highly disadvantaged position due to loss of vision in fully understanding visual information unless they are supported by technology to compensate and equalize (El-Hossary, 2018; Hossain & Bhuiyan, 2013; Susanto & Nanda, 2018). That is to say the visual information in the language instruction is perceived in a reduced or distorted manner from the intended meaning and as there is no speech community in the locality, students depend only on class instruction to learn English.

Citing other researchers (Biddle, 2000; Hammond & Ingalls, 2003; Omer, 2015; Schiemer, 2017; Senge, 2000; Westwood, 1995) reported that teachers' and parents' attitudes and beliefs about disability highly influenced the success of inclusive classes. This type of low level of awareness about disability is not only observed in the society but also exists in the structures of Ethiopian government at various levels (MoE, 2016). Many people tend to view special need education as a privilege, not as the right of disabled children. For instance, based on the findings of a survey study, it was reported that many children were out of school due to attitudinal challenges from both parents and teachers (Omer, 2015).

Low quality of teacher training results in lack of teaching skills which in turn leads to poor learning in schools (Mwakyeja, 2013; Negash, 2017; Omer, 2015). In his study, Omer (2015) found out that, primary school teachers in western Ethiopia faced problems in teaching visually impaired students (VIS): lack of knowledge and skills in teaching methods, lack of resources, and lack of cooperation among teachers and parents. Similarly, Negash (2017) reported that the inclusive nature of VIS in northern Ethiopian secondary schools were low and more of exclusion. That means there were problems in the relevance of school facilities, inclusive curriculum, class instruction and assessment techniques that address the needs of VI students. We observed complaints in the language instruction. We became aware of the presence of these students and their problems. Thus, we were initiated to conduct the study.

This study focuses on the problems of SWVI in an inclusive educational program in learning English language in the primary schools. It describes experience of students with visual

impairment in the teaching and learning process in their English classes; it covers the reflections of these students, English language teachers and other professionals about the school facilities, teachers' practices and students' reactions.

This disability leads to social exclusion and poverty if the students became self-supportive and productive citizens. As there is no research on the local cases, this study adds body of knowledge to the readers and stake holders for raising awareness in supporting these types of students. With this purpose in mind, the following research question was presented.

- How do students with visual impairment experience challenges in their English classes?

Methods

Research Design

This study followed qualitative research approach. Thus, as the participants were small in number, there was a need for depth and details of information they provide in the data generation process. Using phenomenology research design (Holloway & Galvin, 2017) in the data generation and analysis, we tried to understand the lived experience of participants of the study in the English classes and how they struggle to take part in the teaching and learning process.

Research Setting

This study was carried out in two primary schools (Tekel Hayimanot primary school & Dibeza primary school), which are found in Debre Markos town, Ethiopia. These schools were selected as research sites because they are the centres in the Town that offer general special education for special need pupils from grade one to grade four and inclusive education from Grade 5 to Grade 8. The visually impaired students who attended their schooling in these schools used to live in a nearby hostel; their total number was found to be 80.

Participants and Sampling Techniques

The first group of participants was visually impaired students; there were 13 pupils who were drawn from grade 5 to grade 8. Thus, using purposive sampling, five pupils were selected based on their age (>12 years), sexes (three males and two females), awareness about class instruction and participation in being a group leader in their classrooms. The second group of the participants was English language teachers: there were six teachers who were teaching English to

visually impaired pupils from grade 5 to grade 8. Three teachers were selected using purposive sampling technique. The third group of participants was on the side of management: an expert of special need education at the Zonal education department, head of the district education office, and two directors of the two schools. This group was important to get background information about the problem and to triangulate the data obtained from students and teachers.

Data Collection Instruments

In order to generate the data from the participants, observation, interview and focus group discussion were employed. These tools were designed to assess the challenges VIS face in EFL classes in the primary schools.

Observation

Observation is an important tool to gather reliable and valid data in a cost-effective way in a schooling environment. An observation checklist was prepared to assess school-compound factors which may influence visually impaired students' schooling success. This helped to get preliminary data for the interview. The observation checklist, which has got nine items, was adapted from Kassie (2013) and Negash (2017) to fit for the particular purpose of this study.

Interview Guideline

In order to get more rich data from the participants of the study, semi-structured interviews were employed for the teachers and the management group of participants. This tool was important to generate data about the problems they observed in teaching SWVI in English language classes. Each interview took on average an hour.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

Five SWVI were involved in FGD about the issues raised in the research question. That took place in the students' hostel for an hour. The Amharic language was used for the interview with the participants for ease of communication and expressing their ideas and feelings freely.

Data Collection Procedure

The following steps were done to get the data from the participants; first, the observation and interview tools were developed by the researchers and revised by their colleagues to check whether they fit for purpose. Then, time was arranged for the semi-structured interview, focus group discussion and school observation. The students were involved in the focus group

discussion in their residence. Thus, after being informed about the purpose of the study, permission was obtained from the coordinator of the hostel to interview the students.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from Interview and the focus group discussion were transcribed verbatim. The observation data was also taken to support the analysis. Using content analysis technique, themes were identified in line with the procedures of qualitative data analysis. That is repeated readings of transcripts for familiarization, coding, frequency count, forming categories and pattern development, and theme formation in line with research questions.

Ethical considerations

With regard to the ethical issue, proposal review was done by colleagues of the researchers. The participants of the study were informed about the purpose of the study, and anonymity; again they were also informed that they participate with their free will and that the study had no harm in being participant of it. Thus, the participants were coded as follows: English Language Teachers (T1, T2, and T3), students (S1, S2, S3, S4, and S5), school Directors (D1 and D2), head of the education office of the District (D3) and special need education expert (sp1).

Results

Based on the data analysis, the themes were derived from the interviews under the following three broad categories in line with the major research questions.

Need for adapting contents of English textbooks

The students were asked about the English textbooks, tasks and activities in home works and class works, whether they feel comfortable in participating like the sighted students. They reported that some times in the exercises there are questions based on drawings, pictures, tables, and colours. They commented that teachers work with sighted students on activities and exercises that they cannot sense their ideas due to vision loss. The textbooks have also passages in each unit that they do not have chance to read them and to answer various types of questions that follow. When the English language teachers were asked about any adaptation of textbook activities to suit the need of SWVI, they reported that is beyond what they can do.

Lack of resource rooms in the schools

A school is expected to provide some kind of facility to support SWDs. In relation to this idea, it was found out that there are no functional resource rooms where students can use in their free time. There are no Braille text books and reference materials relevant for visually impaired students. All of the participants of the study reported that there is attempt to set up resource rooms using computers in each school but that is not practical due to budget restrictions. These pupils use their Braille and voice recorder for class instruction. As a result, they are not provided with enough materials to read and do exercises.

Absence of assistant teachers

The English language teachers and the management group participants reported that there is occasional brief training for all school teachers about these students and what should be done; however, they mentioned that there is a lot that has to be done more. For example, the language teachers could be supported by employing Assistant Teachers for reading Braille writing. The participants identified this issue as a serious gap that hampers the language instruction. They added that due to lack of attention, the regional education bureau did not fulfil staff request to support SWVI.

Exclusionary Pedagogical practices in the English classes

The student interviewees reported in their discussion that despite the efforts to help SWVI, they felt that they are marginalized in the way language teachers teach all students in a similar fashion. They mentioned that this is observed in class works, home works, and working on the textbooks where there are diagrams, tables, colors, etc., that visually impaired students do not understand the contents. They felt resentment that their teachers seem to forget the presence of visually impaired students in the classes when teachers explain and mark activities for sighted students.

Moreover, the students reported that sometimes teachers do not allow the use of voice recorder for fear of exposing data to third party; as teachers give individual activity in the textbooks without enough explanation, the students hinted that they became dependant over other sighted students to cope up with the instruction. The language teachers also reported that they do not make visually impaired students to be active participants for fear of putting pressure since there

is barrier of communication in reading and writing between visually impaired students and their teachers.

The special need education expert (sp1) also shared this idea and added that the kind of inclusive education is not done according to what should be done to address each and every students educational demands; rather it is a kind of physical presence and a matter of chance to survive for these students in the mainstream class.

Dire need for textbooks and reference materials in audio format

The students reported that they faced shortage of educational materials in audio format (textbooks, references, lectures) to be competent. All of the participants confirmed the distribution of few textbooks written in Braille paper but they commented that these books are not satisfactory in terms of quantity, quality and portability. The students indicated that since teachers' explanation is not enough, they need more audio lectures to supplement at home. The directors reported that the students are left to struggle by themselves with no resources in line with their demands.

Problems in taking examinations and using the four language skills

It is a common practice in the schools that teachers are assigned to read questions and write answers for SWVI when they take tests and examinations. As a result, the students portrayed that they do not have chance to get read each question as they want, since the teachers may tell them not to request for redundant reading. The teachers and the directors also admitted this problem that it is boring for teachers to be assigned as readers for these students. One of the students (S2) gave an instance of this problem that the teacher did not want to read the comprehension passage. Thus, the student was left to guess answers merely listening to the questions read by teachers. Another student (S3) added that the readers may confuse students since they may not understand styles of constructing question in English language examinations; as a result, the readers try to hide the essential information that helps to answer the question.

With regard to the four language skills, SWVI depends on speaking and listening to attend their classroom. However, the students reported that English language teachers mostly focus on passage and grammar activities; yet, these students have limited chance to read the passage. They also added that more weight is given for grammar and passage in the tests and examinations.

With regard to making the class more inclusive, the participants (T1, T2, and T3 & Sp1) reported that there are little strategies targeting for SWVI. The existing strategies are working focusing on sighted students. The inclusion is merely physical presence, not pedagogy wise to address their instructional needs.

Discussion

This study has assessed problems SWVI face in inclusive English classes. These problems were related to lack of school facilities, English language teachers practices and background of students. It was found out that students were working in under-resourced conditions, where there were not enough Braille textbooks and other audio materials that SWVI could use. Moreover, the schools did not have functional resource-rooms to serve these students; the schools were not built considering the demands of SWVI. Moreover, the participation of the local community in supporting the schools used to be negligible.

According to reports from government bodies, schools in Ethiopia were not conducive for disabled students because they lack facilities, infrastructure, safe environment, budget and funding, trained teachers, flexible curriculum (MoE, 2012; 2016). In contrast to this, in other African countries like Botswana and South Africa a lot of investment is made in equipping schools with assistive technology such as computers and audio materials to meet the demands of SWVI (Habulezi & Phasha, 2012). This is because language learning activities bring barriers to these students if they are not supported by assistive technology (Hossain & Bhuiyan, 2013). Moreover, the schools did not have Assistant teachers who could support the language teachers and students. In other countries, for instance, in South Africa, Assistant Teachers are employed to support integration in classes (Morelle & Tabane, 2019).

Students with visual impairment claimed that they are motivated and determined to work hard; however, the way they were treated in the classes is perceived by them as exclusionary. As the SWVI are minority in the mainstream classroom, teachers give more attention for the majority (sighted ones) in their instruction. Therefore, it is unlikely that they will get treatment at individual level. As their training is for typical students, it is likely that teachers generally are not well trained and lack skills in teaching special need students (Kocyigit & Artar 2015). For instance, language teachers cannot read and write English text using Braille. As a result, it is impossible to give feedback to SWVI.

It was found out that there is need for adapting contents of English textbooks by considering demands of SWVI. Based on the findings of the study, it seems that teachers did not have alternative strategies to make the class inclusive; moreover, other challenges were also identified in relation to taking examinations and using the four language skills equally. Here, students are under the pressure of listening and remembering rather than reading and understanding the examination (Kocyigit & Artar 2015). As Habulezi and Phasha (2012) reported in Botswana test takers are given extra time, break, and Braille reading to relieve the pressure of taking examination.

Teachers have to rethink the issue of students with visually impaired in their English classes; the students are physically included but they did not feel they are well served pedagogically. Similar problems were observed in Tanzanian schools due to the failures of teachers to use inclusive teaching methods (Mwakyeja, 2013). However, these students appreciated their attendance in inclusive classrooms since they do not want to be ‘segregated’ in the form of special class (Schiemer, 2017). In this study, it was also found out that visually impaired students have faced serious shortages of getting textbooks and reference materials in audio format. As Sikanku (2018) indicated, this kind of situation is observed also in many other countries.

Generally, the schools seem to perceive the issue of special need education business as usual, and do not serve SWVI in their instruction in a different manner from the sighted students. This shows that there is a gap between what should be done and what is being done in the so called ‘inclusive educational environment’. Thus, regional education bureau has to take serious measures to address the instructional gaps of these students. This is because Ethiopia has signed international conventions to address students with special need education. However, this situation needs all the efforts of stake holders to bring better changes for the marginalized groups of students.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusion is forwarded:

Students are not well served in their day to day classroom instruction and out of school study activities. As they are small in number in each class, they are not given serious attention especially in large classes where the language teachers struggle with the demands of the majority of the students. Moreover, they are not well supplied with the relevant tools and resources for

language learning. This kind of scenario is likely to demotivate students in their academic practices. That brings the question of fair treatment in the schooling environment of these disadvantaged groups who were supposed to have rights to be better supported according to their learning needs. As English language is studied as a means of communication and serves as a medium of instruction in the Ethiopian educational system, the level of English proficiency of these students highly determines their future academic success.

Future Implications

The education and social lives of SWVI could be studied in a larger sample at Zonal or regional levels; that gives knowledge about the educational challenges of these students in order to survive and make adjustment for better life in Ethiopia. As a result, stake holders are expected to try their best to address the problems of these students and create a fair social development. If teachers, students and educational experts are aware of the educational challenges of SWVI, they will be initiated to be part of the solution to minimize the problems.

Understanding the context in which SWVI are working in the educational environment helps stakeholders to introduce assistive technologies to facilitate the teaching and learning process; students do not have access to computers and other applications for reading and studying. It is clear that many students and teachers are not aware of the presence of alternative assistive technology that other students are using in some other countries in the world.

SWVI are left in the mainstream education without the necessary educational materials and manpower support according to their disability. Thus, the government needs to allocate more money for the students with special need in general and visually impaired group in particular. This will help to bring fairness in the education sector.

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