International Journal of Language and Literary Studies
Volume 3, Issue 3, 2021
Homepage : http://ijlls.org/index.php/ijlls

Teaching Visually Impaired Indian ESL Learners In Inclusive Classrooms: A Review of Pedagogical Approaches

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DOI: http://doi.org/ 10.36892/ijlls.v3i3.678

Received:
14/08/2021

Accepted:
20/09/2021

Keywords:
Inclusive Education, Visually Impaired Students, ESL, Learning Mechanism, Teaching Techniques

Abstract

The article analyses the criticality of inclusive education in ESL classrooms and sheds light on the learning mechanism of visually impaired ESL learners with special reference to status of inclusive education in India. It acquaints the educators with visual impairment and its related terms in order to sensitise them for implementing better teaching methods and strategies. The study highlights certain significant factors affecting the teaching of English to students with visual impairment and explores some specific teaching techniques and approaches that teachers adopt while teaching V.I students in an inclusive classroom. The paper will carry out a comparative analysis of the learning mechanisms of VI students and their peers without disability. In the end, it proposes some suggestive measures pertaining to the curriculum development, teaching methods and training programmes which are hoped to be productive in inclusive classrooms comprising of visually impaired ESL learners.

1. INTRODUCTION

English is a global need and is widely used as a means of communication around the globe. It has been taught as a second language extensively in most of the non-English speaking countries to make sure that all students are well acquainted with this important language. Multiple reports have advocated the prominent place of English among other languages of the world. For instance,the World Economic Forum (2016), in its report, placed English as the most influential language in the world.Ethnologue (2019) also listed English as the most spoken language of the world. As the number of ESL learners increases, there will also be an increase in the number of students with special learning abilities which include visually impaired students.

According to a report of World Health Organisation (WHO), 2.2 billion people have a vision impairment or blindness across the globe,and as Vinod Daniel, the CEO of India vision institute said, that 20 percent of world's blind population is in India (Garewal, 2019), it can be estimated that there are more than 40 million blind people in India out of which as Daniel

claims 1.6 million are children. The massive population of visually impaired people and students in particular in India is a pressing concern. It has become an urgent duty of teachers, researchers, and the policymakers to make sure that VI students are getting equal attention and opportunity to learn English among the sighted students. Government and the concerned authorities, in this regard, are leaving no stone unturned to include children with disabilities, and more specifically those with visual impairment in mainstream education to make sure that such students get equal attention as the sighted students do. To make it happen**,** inclusive education is a much-needed move which enables students with disability to develop positive social relationships with peers.It aims at the equalisation of opportunities for differently-abled students, identifying their learning needs among the one with no disability, and seeks to maximise the potential of all.

However, teaching visually impaired students along with the sighted learners, i.e. in an inclusive classroom have been a challenging task for teachers for much of the learning is a visual process and most of the current educational curriculum is oriented towards the sighted learners(Torreno, n.d). Thus, if teachers fail to integrate non-sighted students successfully in an inclusive classroom by providing them with equal learning opportunities,inclusion remains unsuccessful (Morris, 2014).This is one of the reasons why visually impaired students are sometimes not given as much attentionas they need for the second language acquisition, and thus they feel alienated and marginalised (Guinan, 1997; Donley, 2002; Araluce, 2005; Coskun, 2013). Therefore, teachers need to be trained enough to identify the learning needs of differently-abled students and implement certain necessary techniques, as discussed in this paper, to ensure the best learning environment for V.I students.

2. INCLUSION IN INDIA: FROM POLICY TO IMPLEMENTATION

The Indian education system has transcended many critical stages from segregation to integration in a quest to bring all the special need children to mainstream education. Inclusion has been one of the concerns for Indian policymakers and government since the formation of theKothari Commission, 1964 which integrated persons with disabilities as a part of plan of action to improve the overall education system. It was however dropped down later by the government (Kohama, 2012). On the similar lines, National policies on education (NPE), set up in 1968, stressed the universalisation of education and initiated a scheme called 'Integrated Education for Disabled Children' (IEDC) in 1974 for mainstreaming the differently-abled children in schools. The term inclusive education came to the forefront in 1994 after the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO) in which India also participated (Singal, 2005). The Salamanca Statement gave impetus to inclusion, and in 1997, Jangira introduced the concept in India by referring to the Warnock report (Sarkar, 2017; Singal, 2005). Since then, various policies have been made to include differently-abled into mainstream education, such as Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (education for all) (2002),Inclusion in Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities (IECYD) (2005), Inclusive Education of the Disabled at the Secondary Stage (IEDSS) (2008), and National Policy for People with Disabilities (2009).

The challenges of inclusive education in India are quite different from developed countries where education is already inclusive of girls, disadvantaged, ethnic and immigrant groups, both in state and private sector (Jha, 2002). As pointed out by Jha, challenges of inclusion in India are at three level i.e. *"the inclusion of children with special needs and disabilities, the inclusion of children from socially and economically disadvantaged groups and those from diverse cultural and linguistic groups, and those who are in classrooms but feel alienated due to a non-relevant curriculum and teacher centred teaching methods"* (2002). Keeping in view the above challenges, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) launched National Education Policy (NEP, 2019) and kept these children in underrepresented groups (URGs). The URGs represent people with special needs

(for instance learning disabilities), gender identities (such as women and transgender individuals), socio-economic conditions (such as the urban poor) and socio-cultural identities (like SC, ST, OBCs, Muslims, migrant communities) (NEP, 2019). N.E.P has clearly emphasised on equitable and inclusive education by changing the curriculum and culture of the schools. This policy unlike the previous policies has targeted broader group rather than considering only impaired children. If followed with a firm pragmatic intent, N.E.P is expected to be a paradigm shift for inclusive education in India.

According to the "State of the Education Report for India: Children with Disabilities", 75% of disabled children don't attend schools in India. The number of enrolment reduces with each successive level of schooling. The report also stated that three fourth of disabled children under five years and one fourth from five to nineteen years do not attend any educational institutions. Out of all the disabilities, 19% are visually impaired, which is second highest to disability in movement, i.e. 20% (Census of India, 2011). Hence, the statistic indicates to an entirely different situation on the ground. Despite all the policies and funds allocated for inclusive education, there is still a gap between policy and implementation. Therefore, to make sure that the differently-able groups (and more specifically those with visual impairment) are getting equal learning opportunities in mainstream education, concerned authorities need to look into the whole academic settings with a view of transforming the curriculum, culture and pedagogical practices.

A large part of the current educational curriculum followed, prerequisites the use of eyesight, hence, individuals, who are visually impaired, experience challenges when acquiring education. The challenges experienced by visually impaired can be resolved by the use of technologies, materials, devices and equipment but the availability of human assistance in making them understand the concepts and taking exams is vital.

3. VISUAL IMPAIRMENT AND INTERRELATED TERMS

Visual impairment, also known as vision impairment and vision loss,has been defined time and againby various scholars in one way or the other.Howeverdespitethe bulk of definitions, visual impairment is sometimes misunderstood as blindness, which of course is not, rather it is a blanket term which defines the degree of vision loss from low vision to total blindness (Bailey & Hall, 1989; Aslantas, 2017).Thus,this research article is explicitly concerned with the definitions coming fromsome concerned official agencies, explaining at what point of visual acuity a person is called low vision or completely blind.

The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), simply defines visual impairment as a functional limitation of the eye or the vision system. The world health Organisation(1992), on the other hand, describes a person with low vision as "*who has impairment of visual functioning even after treatment and/or standard refractive correction, and has VA (visual acuity) of less than 6/18 to light perception, or a visual field of less than 10 degrees from the point of fixation, but who uses, or is potentially able to use, vision for the planning and/or execution of a task."*(p. 18). The International Classification of Diseases, 10th revision (ICD-10) categorised visual impairment into four stages, (i) mild or no VI, moderate VI, severe VI and blindness. Visual Acuity (VA) under 6/8 collectively forms Moderate and severe VI, and eye with the best refractive correction has visual acuity of 6/120 and above. On the other hand, a person is kept in the category, i.e. blindness when she/he has a visual field radius, not above 10 degrees around the central point of fixation in the better eye.

Besides the above-discussed classification, another associative term to visual impairment is 'Refractive Error'. World Health organisation defines refractive error as "*a common eye disorder which occurs when the eye cannot focus the images clearly*."While common refractive errors such as myopia (near-sightedness), hyperopia (far-sightedness), astigmatism (blurred vision), and presbyopia (loss of near vision with age) can be corrected

by wearing glasses or contact lenses,visual impairment cannot be corrected by wearing glasses. Uncorrected refractive error often leads to visual impairment.

4. V.I. LEARNERS IN AN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS: PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES AND LEARNING MECHANISM

Visually-impaired learners perceive tangible feeds and abstract notions in a way that deviates with the way the sighted learners do. Majerova (2016) explains *"While a sighted individual relies on the information perceived, a person with visual impairment uses perception in the context of imagination, and this seems to be valid especially when we talk about an individual who gradually loses the sight and uses remaining visual perception"* (p.751).This varied sense of comprehension among the V.I students compels educators to implement techniques and approaches in a different manner altogether. Researchers believe that the spur of dynamic tactile-audible force should be made into use to elicit an active response from them (Basran, 2012) and it is vital that the sounds be attached to meaningful and intelligible sources or else the concept being taught to such students will run out of meaning (Czerwińska, 2007).

Teaching VI students in an inclusive classroom need proper planning, coupled with the right approach that could serve as the most effective common stimulus for both sighted and non-sighted learners. Since VI students do not have the privilege of experiencing visual information, teachers should design their lectures and presentation in such a way that VI students can receive the input with the help of other senses viz. listening, touch, hand movements etc, which in turn has triggered the centralised role of assistive technology like braille, voice recorder, large print, print with tactile symbols, text to speech voice recognition etc. (Bowers et al. 2001; Lovie-Kitchin et al. 2001; Theoret et al. 2004; Ferrell 2006; Bouck et al. 2011). These technologies enable VI students to access the computer gadgets, internet and social networks like Facebook, Whatsapp, and Instagram through screen reading software.

Besides the use of assistive technology, the availability of human assistance in making such students understand the concepts is also equally significant. Researchers stress that certain considerations about VI students should be kept in mind. Among these considerations, the most important is the degree of blindness of VI students, i.e. whether the student is partially blind or complete blind; and the background of VI students, i.e. whether the student is blind from the birth itself or at some age, as there is always a greater probability of classes being comprised of heterogeneous groups. While students with low vision are generally encouraged to read large print materials (Duquette, 2001; KamalıArslantaş, 2017; Willings, 2017; Ravenscroft, 2019), on the other hand, teachers have to be more vocal and precise in their speech when it comes to addressing students with no vision. They also need to describe the whole visual information like a picture or a graph (Castellano, 1996; Boas et al., 2012; Seng, n.d.). However, some visual inputs, such as colours, are difficult to describe. Researchers suggest that a person who is blind since birth, i.e. who hasn't experienced any sight ever, cannot experience the real colours. Colours can only be described to such students by associating them with other senses viz. feeling, touch, and taste. For example, they can be told that 'Blue' is a colour of 'coolness' and feels like relaxation whereas 'Red' is a colour of 'hotness', which can also be associated with 'Anger'. Similarly, 'Brown' colour feels like earth and the dead parts of plants and trees (WikiHow, 2019; Romm, 2016; Eagan, 2014; Trendacosta, 2014; Kent, n.d.). On the other hand, students who are not blind since birth but at some age, i.e. after they had developed senses can remember the colours when talking about. Besides, ESL instruction often requires physical demonstration as well as visual materials such as photos, flashcards, videos etc. Teaching V.I students requiresboth audio and haptic information. In this regard, the related literature suggests the use of actual physical objects in place of their visual images; for example, teachers can bring mini 3D objects of a

tree, car, lamp etc. which will help VI students forming a connection between the word and the object by touching and exploring the 3D objects (Baltisberger, 2019; Hainninen, 1990).

5. THE ISSUE OF VERBALISM

Certain issues are common among visually impaired children such as verbalism, echolalia, difficulty with pronouns and frequent questioning (Willings, 2019). Among these problems, the most talked about is verbalism. There is a common understanding among the scholars that visual impairment does not impede listening and speaking ability of VI students (Fields, 2010; Ghafri, 2015; Topor& Rosenblum, 2013)and, thus, verbal description becomes a major source of developing concepts about the environment for such students. Consequently, they often remain ignorant of the referent or the real meaning of the words they come to encounter, which is known as verbalism. Cutsforth (1932, 1951) was the first scholar who defines verbalism with respect to the psychology of people who are blind. He explained verbalism as "*the use of abstract concepts not apprehended by concrete experiences*" (1932: 48). According to him, blind children use visual terms, the experience of which is inaccessible to blind people, making their concepts empty and words meaningless (Cutsforth, 1951). However, Cutsforth's position that the use of words with visual referents must be avoided in the education of blind children was criticised later (Dokecki, 1966; Harley, 1963). While V.I students are found to be frequent when it comes to using visual verbs and visual behaviour, verbalism is considered as a major problem that language teachers encounter while teaching language to visually impaired students(Vinter et al., 2012)as instead of grasping the required impressions from concrete experiences through the senses, VI students accept the verbal descriptions of others through abstraction, and often seem to be repeating words and phrases they heard from others, and this abstraction may result in an inaccurate understanding of the environment surrounding(Ranganathan, 2014).

6. IDENTIFICATION OF ENHANCED SENSE(S) AND MULTILE INTELLIGENCE

Visually impaired people have often been claimed to have enhanced and a better sense of hearing, smell, touch, as well as some cognitive functions like a memory than what sighted people possess. Exploring this view, Wyszynska (1994) writes "*It is worth considering that the absence of sight heightens other areas of sensory perception by focusing on the ability of intact senses that thereby compensate for the lack of one or more"*(p.35). Researchers claim that their major reliance on senses other than the vision, and largely on hearing for perceiving information eventually makes them gain strength and control over such senses, (Bates, 2012; Burklen, 1985; Cohut, 2019; Goldreich, 2010; Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, 2017; Miller, 2017; Wan et al., 2010; Wyszyńska, 1994).Morrissey (1931), a blind teacher, in his article "*Teaching Foreign Languages in Schools for the Blind"* which is considered as the first-ever article on visual impairment and second language acquisition, points out that students' well-trained ears are more likely to learn a second language with perfection. He claims that visually impaired and especially blind students learn a foreign language with ease with the help of their hearing sense which is the basic notion of second language learning with very little or no relation to vision.

The above claim regarding the enhanced sense(s) is somewhat similar, rather associative to what Howard Garder in his excellent book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* put forward eight types of intelligences, i.e. verbal-linguistics, mathematical-logical intelligence, visual-spatial intelligence, intrapersonal intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, musical-rhythmic intelligence, and naturalistic intelligence (Gardner, 1983). Through this theory, Gardner specifically stressed that visually impaired people also have spatial intelligence, and they can recognise shapes without visual assistance. It is the spatial intellect of the blind people, which enables them to translate the perceptible sensations into mental calculations of length and visualisations of form. He says, *"But just as linguistic intelligence is not wholly dependent upon the auditory-*

oral channels and can develop in an individual deprived of these modes of communication, so, too, spatial intelligence can develop (as we shall see) even in an individual, who is blind and therefore has no direct access to the visual world" (ibid. 174). According to Gardner (1983), all of us possess these eight intelligences and each person possesses one (or more) enhanced sense(s) than the other. Harmer (2007) while relating this claim of Gardner with 'inclusive teaching', writes, "*If we accept that different intelligences predominate in different people, it suggests that the same learning task may not be appropriate for all of our students*" (p.90).There have been a few scholars who investigated the criticality of multiple intelligence theory in the language classroom and came up with the measure to identify and enhance these senses in students with special learning needs. For instance, Peters (2015) attempted to find out if multiple intelligence influences the foreign language acquisition mechanism and found that intelligence is one of the crucial elements in the process of learning a foreign language. He emphasised that knowing learners' enhanced intelligence(s) helps educators to adequately plan suitable teaching methods and techniques.

Aziz, Roseli, Eshak, &Mutalib (2010) also developed assistive courseware (AC) learning content specifically for visually impaired learners based on multiple intelligence theory by designing activities and modules outlining a storyboard of animals. Similarly, Balushi (2006)suggested activities specifically for blind children to improve different intelligences such as imagination, creativity, cooperation, social skills, self-reflection, linguistic abilities, critical thinking, scientific thinking and attitudes towards nature through activities like thinking of an analogy, pattern recognition to predict what is next, modelling the clay, playful listening and so on.Thus, If ESL teachers can relate to the enhanced sense and intelligence of the blind students, and are able to identify as to which of these senses both sighted and visually impaired student(s) are well contented with, they would be able to design activities projecting the enhanced intelligence(s) which will definitely contribute towards yielding the desired performance from students

7. SUGGESTIVE MEASURES

To alleviate the difference among learners of an inclusive classroom, the educators should design the curriculum in such a way that it can serve the pupil of diverse abilities. As Harper (2018), Eikel-Pohen (2019), and Hartmann (2011) suggested, lessons or activities should be made as per the Universally Designed Principle (UDP) that includes three points viz. multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression, and multiple means of engagement. If these multifaceted approaches are involved in classroom teaching, then it can serve the demands of the learners with impaired vision as well as their sighted peers. So, instructors should consider the above principles while making the course element or pedagogical strategies in an inclusive classroom.

It is evident that the inclusive language classroom requires methods/ techniques different than a self-contained language classroom. Drama activities will undoubtedly serve the purpose of UDP as it includes all the three aspects, i.e. representation, action and engagement. In this scenario, myriad of scholars suggested the use of role-play or drama activities in such types of language classrooms. Kilinc et al. (2017) asserted that drama strategies are competent enough to provide a multitude of mechanism by exploring their smartness in different ways and make them involved with their peers to construct meaning. Roleplays and dramatised dialogues are one of the essential activities which can enhance oral skills by using specific meaning and expressions in the target language (Eikel-Pohen, 2019; Sofia, 2016). Thus, inclusive classroom should include role-playing or dramatic activities to utilise the multiple strategies of learning as it contains various intelligence like interpersonal, intra-personal, verbal and kinaesthetic which will eventually turn out to be advantageous for VI students.

The pre-service and in-service teachers of English need to be trained in such a manner that they not only able to use the assistive aids but they should also be able to adapt teaching methods as per the learning mechanism of visually impaired persons. This can only be possible if they are provided with training programmes concerning inclusive education in English language teaching. Additionally, there should also be an incorporation of syllabus regarding inclusive education in ELT curriculum as it helps the future teachers of English in getting an idea about the learning style and mechanism of such pupils.

8. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The visually impaired population in countries like India where English is taught as a second language needs essential training of English language to integrate well into society and most of such students in India too are found to be curious about being trained in English. With modern education system providing avenues for the upliftment of the visually impaired through education, it is the duty of the concerned stakeholders and policymakers to make sure that visually impaired students are getting no less learning opportunitiesthan their sighted peers. Teachers too, are supposed to identify the unique educational needs of such learners and try to establish satisfactory interpersonal relationships in order to make a good and flexible learning situation for them.

The article highlights the criticality of techniques and using the necessary materials to equalise VI students with the sighted ones and also discussed some significant factors that play a major role while visually impaired students sit in an inclusive classroom. Besides the identification of issues and challenges that visually impaired ESL learners often face in an inclusive class and implementation of remedial measures, this paper gives special emphasis on Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligence and suggests that it is crucial to track the enhanced sense(s) specifically tactile and hearing through which VI students perceive information and gives stress to sharpen these senses which are hoped to ensure the maximum outcome in teaching such students. However, the issue of inclusion for visually impaired ESL learners is not only limited to teachers and students, but other functionaries are operating at different levels, i.e. policymakers, educational institutions, and families. There is a need for better teacher training programmes, adaptive teaching methods, implementation of sound policies regarding inclusion and collaboration of teachers and parents in assessing their learning needs. It requires a cooperative effort from each stakeholder to implement best practices of inclusive education in ESL classrooms to support visually impaired students. The article aims to sensitise the educators and researchers towards the specific needs of visually impaired ESL learners, especially in India, where inclusive practices are not practically followed. There are number of studies on language learning of VI pupil, and they all proved that visual impairment could not be a barrier for foreign language education, provided the students are equipped with adaptive teaching methods and technology.

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