

CHALLENGES OF TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE TO VISUALLY IMPAIRED STUDENTS AT A UNIVERSITY LEVEL IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract. The article gives some insight into the challenges of teaching English to visually impaired students at university level in Uzbekistan. The authors also present their findings on the basis of the survey conducted for the purpose of investigating the level of preparedness of English teachers of Uzbekistan to teach in a classroom with a visually impaired student.

Keywords: special education, inclusive education, visually impaired students, differentiated instruction, learning strategies, visual memory.

In this era of globalization, learning foreign languages has become an essential part of educational process in many countries as well as in Uzbekistan. The government of Uzbekistan is paying a considerable attention to developing teaching foreign languages by adopting laws (The Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. PQ-5117 of May 19, 2021) that are improving the quality of teaching foreign languages, by financially encouraging young people and teachers with high level of language proficiency, by collaborating with international organizations which provide effective trainings to equip Uzbek teachers with the latest methods of teaching foreign languages. All of these measures taken by the government provide a young generation with the opportunity to learn foreign languages and through this to obtain knowledge and skills that make them competent in developing different spheres and contribute to the development of the country.

In order for the teaching to be effective a teacher must be able to provide an individual approach to every student. Students have different learning styles, which are auditory, visual, kinesthetic and reading/writing. While planning a lesson the teacher considers these styles and develops instructional materials that meet the needs of learners. The teacher who is aware of the methods of teaching a foreign language, of the theory of learning can effectively apply the theoretical knowledge into practice and assist students to succeed in making progress in learning a language. What happens if there is a student who is visually impaired in that particular class? Does a teacher who is well aware of the methods of teaching foreign languages know how to approach this particular student? Has she been trained enough to meet the needs of a visually impaired student? What challenges will the teacher and this student face? How about the rest of the group? In our research, we tried to study the process of teaching English in the classrooms that have a visually impaired student and understand the challenges the teachers are facing.

Before moving to our research results, we would like to look into the challenges a visually impaired student experiences while learning a foreign language. There are several studies that have been compiled to understand the challenges of the visually-impaired students (VIS) in learning English language. Some of them are Aryanti (2014) where the author posits that the challenges can be put into two different categories: internal and external difficulties. Internal difficulties come from the VIS themselves which relates to VIS' sight conditions and their learning strategies. External difficulties come from the learning environment including difficulties from the lecturer, friends, materials and the facilities. VIS have different learning strategies. The lecturer should discuss some classroom adaptations such as seating arrangement, friends' assistance and peer teaching, adapted facilities and exam accommodation, for instance exam assistance, longer exam time, inclusive examination and larger print for low vision students. Finally, the lecturer should choose appropriate teaching strategies, media and teaching aids.

Kocyigit and Artar (2015) researched Turkish students in Izmir and wrote that the challenges common to both teachers and learners are grouped under two main headings: emotional and pedagogic. All the teachers shared their emotional concerns at the very beginning of the term for this being their first experience as a teacher to teach a visually impaired learner in a classroom with sighted learners. They expressed their dilemma on making positive discrimination as a result of not being able to suppress their feeling of pity or being numb with over controlling their feelings. Not surprisingly, their concern was also shared by the learners. They expressed their fear of adaptation and the attitude of their peers as well as teachers. Luckily, however, such worries on both parts disappeared in a quite short time when they got to know each other and achieved to approach one another with sympathy.

In order to study what challenges English teachers of Uzbekistan face when they have a visually impaired students in their classrooms, we distributed an online

survey among them. We wanted to find out the level of preparedness of English language teachers to teach in such a classroom.

An online survey was conducted among in-service English teachers who work at different higher educational institutions across Uzbekistan. The survey included open and closed questions. The number of respondents was 47. The respondents were the graduates from different universities across Uzbekistan. To the question if they had ever had a visually impaired student in their class, 40.9% of respondents replied as “yes” and 59.1% responded that they hadn’t had a visually impaired student. When English teachers were asked what challenges they had faced while teaching a visually impaired students they reported the lack of knowledge of how to teach these students, the scarcity of books in Braille, the emotional state of the student that affected a teacher as well, difficulties with reading tasks, the facts that students could not see the screen, power point presentations, visual aids, challenges while explaining reading and writing techniques, the necessity of paying more attention to these students, which may make other students uncomfortable, ineffectiveness of using materials for visual learners, psychological state of the student, who may experience low self-esteem and low motivation, choosing activities for inclusive education, access to learning materials, time management and social interaction. If we look at the number of teachers who had a visually impaired student it is not a small number. It was 18 teachers out of 47. That’s where the responses about challenges came from. Our next question could help us realize one of the reasons why these teachers have so many challenges. To the question, whether they knew about the methodology of teaching visually impaired students, only 17.4% of the respondents answered “yes”. 82.6% did not know how to teach their subject to visually impaired learners. The next question revealed that only 3% of these teachers have received training for teaching visually impaired students. Sadly, 93.5 % have never received any training on how to teach when there is a visually

impaired student in the classroom. The survey revealed that the challenges the teachers face while teaching to the visually impaired students can be attributed to the lack of training both when they were students and after they became in-service teachers. To the question whether the methodology of teaching visually impaired students should be included into the curriculum of the universities that train teachers, 65.2% of teachers responded as “yes”, 8.7 % as “no” and 26.1% as “I don’t know”. Our last question was to provide some recommendations for making the learning process more effective based on their experience. The recommendations included studying the methodology related to teaching visually impaired students, participating in trainings that provide instruction on how to teach VIS, encourage peer support and collaboration, give personalized support to such students, using methods that meet the needs of students with auditory and kinesthetic learning styles, provide handouts with larger script, using AI generated materials to teach them.

Conclusion

As we see VISs face a lot of challenges and inclusive education in Uzbekistan demands that they are given proper attention per available resources. Some researchers suggest that instructors should choose appropriate teaching strategies, media and teaching aids. The use of appropriate games also can help students to understand the material (Aryanti 2014). We believe the issue is more on teacher training. Our teachers are good English teachers, but they are not trained to teach VISs and obviously lack expertise. It would be great if there are online webinars or trainings for our teachers to be trained on how to work with VISs.

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