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An Eye on Visually Impaired EFL Learners' Experience with Inclusive Education at Tertiary Level

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education can be referred to as the process of bringing disabled and non-disabled students together in the same educational environment in order to provide equal educational opportunities. This study focuses on the case of visually impaired students when learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at Tertiary Level. The aim of the current paper is to explore the challenges that face visually impaired EFL undergraduates and their teachers' accommodation to cope with their needs within an inclusive environment. For that end, data were collected by interviewing three visually impaired undergraduates, besides administering a questionnaire to their teachers in the Department of English at Setif2 University. Descriptive data revealed that learners' special needs were not sufficiently considered in terms of adapted study materials, appropriate equipment and technological devices that assist visually impaired students to be autonomous particularly during exams. Drawing on the major findings, some pedagogical implications were solicited to the different stakeholders to consider the needs of visually impaired learners and the necessity to train tertiary teachers in special education.

Keywords: Visually impaired learners, special needs education, challenges, EFL learners, inclusive education

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INTRODUCTION

It is widely agreed that education is an international human right fundamental to the life of individuals and to the community as a whole, since it provides personal, social, and academic development that is essential for future employment and integration in society. For decades, the education of individuals with special needs or disabilities continued to be a major concern to many educationalists and human rights activists due to their increasing number across the world. World Health Organization (WHO)'s last reports counted more than 285 million people with visual impairment in the world. Visual Impairment comprehends both a low level of vision and complete and total blindness. The American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) (2012) used the terms "legal blindness" and "total blindness" to legally define blindness to be "a level of vision loss". There are various United Nations conventions that recognize the importance of education to persons with disabilities, for instance the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) that calls on the insurance of effective education for disabled individuals at all level. Though much efforts have been spent so far to provide appropriate educational services at primary, elementary and secondary levels throughout the introduction of special schools, yet when it comes to tertiary level, visually impaired students are still facing many challenges. This is because a considerable number of law and treaties favor the inclusive education that brings disabled and non-disabled students together in the same educational environment (Phinias, Jeriphanos, and Kudakwashe, 2013). Given that little research has explored implementing exclusive education for visually impaired EFL learners at university, this study is set forth to report visually impaired students' challenges and their teachers' instructional practices, at inclusive educational environment namely when learning English as a foreign language. Thus the current enquiry is motivated by the following research questions:

1. *What are the challenges that the visually impaired students face as EFL learners at University, within inclusive education?*
2. *What accommodations are made by teachers to meet the special needs of the visually impaired EFL students?*

1. Review of the Literature

1.1 Inclusive Education for Visually Impaired Students

Inclusive education brings disabled and non-disabled students together in the same educational environment (Phinias et al., 2013) so that visually impaired students could feel fully integrated (Mwakyeja, 2013). "Being accepted and having a sense of

belonging makes students feel part of the community". A considerable number of law and treaties favour the inclusive education for exceptional learners. In the last decades, there have been much global considerations regarding the necessity to implement inclusive and equity in education of people with disabilities (UNESCO, 2015; World Education Forum, 2015). Inclusive education provides the opportunity to gain skills that allow persons with disabilities to become important members of the community. It contributes in the development of students so that they can function in a sighted world. Snell (1991) sustains that the inclusion of individuals with disabilities promotes their chances to function and interact with ordinary individuals in "real" world. Wehman (1990) agrees that spending more time in inclusive environment promotes the educational, social, and occupational chances of students with disabilities. However, there is a continuous need for all educational stakeholders (including teachers and higher education institutions) to consider restructuring of the education system and practices, in order to facilitate learning for visually impaired students who may face many barriers in inclusive settings (Fraser and Maguvhe, 2008).

1.2 Learning Barriers for Visually Impaired Students

Visually impaired students face many barriers within inclusive education environment. Evidence from previous studies shows that little efforts are made to reach out to students with disabilities who depend on information about support services (Ralph and Boxall, 2005). Consequently, there is an obvious need for universities to offer much more support and accommodations to these students if they are to reach their potential. Support can include adaptations of lesson materials or a modification of the instructional practices and assessment tasks or support services provided outside of the school environment (Allen and Cowdery, 2011). Because visually impaired students are unable to use their sense of sight for learning, they have to optimize other senses to process information, such as hearing and tactile senses. Others barriers due to total blindness beside the absence of visual input are delayed development on cognition, language, personal and social adjustment, in addition to students' challenge in understanding the visual concepts such as colours, three dimensional spaces, shapes and so on. Actually, lack of vision can also hamper cognitive development since it limits the unifying experience of the visual sense deliver innately to the sighted children (Kirk et al., 2009). Therefore, teachers need to consider the barriers faced by the visually impaired students when designing their instructional materials. According to (Pratiwi et al., 2018) blind students face some barriers in terms of reading, in-class activities, and finding references as shown in Table 1.

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Table 1. Barriers, Accommodation, and Assistive Technology for Blind Student

(Rufii & Rochmawati, 2019)

Barriers	Accommodation	Assistive Technology
Blind students cannot access reading materials in a printed forms	Providing the reading materials in an accessible format such as word, pdf or epub.	Screen Reader such as JAWS or NVDA
Blind students cannot access visual concepts such as diagram, colours, table, and so on	Teacher needs to describe the visual concepts	Alt text or alternative text attached to the picture so the blind student can have a clear description on the picture. Slate, Stylus, Picture
Blind students are struggling in taking note, summarizing, and understanding all lecture materials presented in visual concepts.	Teacher should provide the materials before the class so the blind students can have an enough time to learn in. Teacher can allow blind students to record and use their handheld devices during the lecture.	Descriptor Software such as cloud vision, note taking software such as Evernote, write pad and so on.
Written examination	Teacher can provide reader that assist the blind students to do the exam. Reader will help the blind students by reading them the question and writing their answer on the answer sheet. Alternatively, teacher can design examination that is accessible for blind students such as providing the examination in form of audio, braille or word file.	Recorder, Laptop, Braille Translation software, Braille Printer.

Source: Lintangsari, Emaliana (2020 p. 441)

1.3 Services for Students with Visual Impairment

There are multiple ways of instructional methods that can be employed in teaching visually impaired students with reference to their learning preferences and learning styles that affect students' academic performance (Chetty, et al.,2019) .

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Visually impaired students need variety of opportunities in exploring and examining the learning materials through alternative sense beside visual inputs such as tactile and audio input (Kızılaslan, 2019). For that purposes, computer laboratories are considered an essential means for students with visual impairment. There are software and additional devices that can be use used with computers to facilitate learning. Software permit writing, reading, and web surfing. Peripheral tools permit reading, printing in Braille (Office for Persons with Disabilities, the University of Warsaw, 2005)

For quality learning for students with visual impairments, some features and conditions should be respected. These include special services from specialized teachers, teaching and learning resources, as well as assistive devices like Braille and magnifying glasses and the use of flexible teaching methods (Webster & Roe, 1998; Simon et al, 2010). However, many teachers state that they do not have enough knowledge concerning special needs education in inclusive classrooms, and dealing with students with visual impairments (Mwakyeja, 2013). A study conducted by Lewis and Little (2007) revealed that, teachers in inclusive schools, are not aware of inclusive education, and how to make environment become friendly and inclusive to all learners. Another study done by Gronlund, Lim and Larsson (2010) revealed that, there are no clear policies and documents on inclusive education and how it should be implemented in schools. Moreover, there are very few teacher training institutions in the area of special needs and inclusive education; therefore general teachers do not acquire sufficient training (Kapinga, 2012)

2. Method

This enquiry took place in the Department of English Language and Literature at Setif 2 University. The enquiry considers the case of three visually impaired EFL undergraduates as the main subjects of the study in addition to nine of volunteered teachers during their BA and MA courses. To collect data, an interview was used with the three students and a questionnaire was designated to their teachers. The questionnaire was adapted from the literature namely two previous studies (Monica Lovi, 2013 & Bishaw, 2013). Data was analysed using a mixed methods approach: while the qualitative approach was applied with open-ended questionnaire's items and the thematic analysis of the interview answers; the quantitative approach was employed with numerical data of Likert scales and close-ended questionnaire items. Ethical considerations were assured through asking for the consent of all participants and keeping their identity and personal information anonymous.

2.1 Description of the Interview

The interview consisted of five parts. In the first part, visually impaired students were asked to estimate their level of study, the condition of the impairment, and if

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they had any other disability apart from the visual impairment. The aim of the first part was to gain background information of the participants. In the second part, the participants were asked about their experience at university in order to explore their social and personal prospects of inclusive education. In the third part of the interview, the focus was on the teaching and learning aspects. The participants were asked about their note taking methods and the accommodations they had used while studying. They were also asked about the importance, the provision, and the accessibility of adapted study materials. Besides that, the focus was on the language four skills and the difficulty level in their acquisition . The aim of this part was to explore the challenges that visually impaired students face while learning English. In the fourth part, the participants were asked about the accommodations made for them during exams with the aim to explore the extent to which their special needs were considered in this regard. The last part of the interview considered students' challenges and their aspirations to facilitate their learning tasks. Table 2 summarizes the profile of the three visually impaired English students that were the target population of this study.

Table. 2 Visually impaired Students' Profiles

Participants	Gender	Condition of impairment
Participant 01 (P 01)	Female	Fully impaired
Participant 02 (P 02)	Male	Fully impaired
Participant 03 (P 03)	Female	Partially impaired

2.2 Description of Teachers' Questionnaire

Teachers' questionnaire was developed from the relevant literature and was administered to nine participants who volunteered in the study who are in charge of teaching different subjects. Their experience in teaching ranked between one and ten years. The questionnaire is divided into three parts: besides the first part that consists of the background information of the participants, the second part explores EFL teachers' experiences with visually impairment students and their accommodations to meet their special needs. The last part of the questionnaire deals with assessment of the visually impaired EFL students and highlighted major obstacles faced by teachers. (T + number) was used to code teachers (eg :T 01- T 09)

Table.3 Teachers' Profiles

Teacher's code	Modules Taught	Teaching Experience	Training in special Education
T 01	Literature – Written expression – Phonetics	02	NO
T 02	Linguistics	02	NO

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T 03	Oral expression – TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language)	03	NO
T 04	Phonetics	02	NO
T 05	SLA (Second Language Acquisition) – Phonetics	02	NO
T 06	Oral expression	01	NO
T 07	Phonetics – Grammar	01	NO
T 08	ICL (Introduction to the Culture of Language)	02	NO
T 09	Literature	10	NO

3.Results Analysis and Discussion

3.1 Interview Analysis

○ Visually impaired EFL learners experience with inclusive education

When the participants were asked how they experienced inclusive education at university with their sighted peers, the first participant P 01 said that she liked her major and she was motivated to do her best by relying on her listening ability and other senses to learn English in collaboration with her sighted friends. As for the second participant's P 02 experience at the university, he replied that the situation was very challenging: *"as a blind student, the situation is very challenging; because we do not have that much attention from the responsible, also the lack of the materials"*. Accordingly, the lack of study materials had made his experience at university a challenging one. With regards to the third participant P 03, she stated that, *"at the very beginning, the situation was hard"* as she did not have any friends at that time, besides university environment was so different that she took some time to get accustomed with the the new atmosphere.

○ Attitudes toward inclusion

When participants were furtherly asked about their opinions regarding inclusion at university, the first participant P 01 stated that it was *"so okay"* and that her sighted peers were so friendly as well as the teachers. However, she pointed to some problems in meeting her special needs. The second participant P 02 was also for inclusive education at university. He said that visually impaired students were just like other students *"They are ordinary people"*. He encouraged the interaction with sighted people as well as making friendship with them: *"we should be friends with them because we are not any different from other persons"*. The third participant P 03 said that being included at this university with other sighted people was very significant and important for her.

○ Visually Impaired Students' Challenges with EFL learning

In response to the question that sought the consideration of visually impaired learners' special needs and material availability, two participants (P1, P3) replied *"sometimes"* while the third one (P2) replied *"seldom"* claiming that some teachers

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do not provide them with electronic version of the lecture in order to print it in braille. As for the other learning challenges, two respondents said that they were not always allowed to record the lectures by some teachers. Additionally, teachers were not trained in special needs education that they do not provide appropriate study materials in certain subjects or they simply disregard the visually impaired students' needs due to their limited number in comparison with the outnumbered classed of other learners. The participants also considered exams and quizzes challenging. One participant P 03 said that she did not have additional time. P 02 claimed that during the quiz, "*some teachers do not provide the test in braille*". Sometimes during exams, it was hard to find an assistant to read the questions and report the answers. She said: "*I cannot find a person to read the questions and write my answers.*" The same thing for P 01. She said: "*Some teachers forgot about my impairment, so they do not prepare any accommodation for me*".

The participants were subsequently asked to rank the language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing according to the level of difficulty by choosing 1, 2, or 3 for each skill: "1" means "not a problem". "2" means "a minor problem". "3" means "a problem". The mean was calculated and the following results were obtained as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 : Level of Difficulty in Language Skills for Visually Impaired Students

The skill	Not a problem (1)	A minor problem (2)	A problem (3)	The mean
Listening	03	00	00	1.00
Speaking	02	01	00	1.33
Reading	00	03	00	2.00
Writing	00	00	03	3.00

As indicated in Table 2, when the means of the four skills are compared :

$$1.0 \text{ (Listening)} < 1.33 \text{ (Speaking)} < 2.00 \text{ (Reading)} < 3.00 \text{ (Writing)}$$

According to the three participants, writing skill is the most difficult one. The participants considered the writing skill "a problem" because it required time. P 03 said: "*writing is a problem because it takes time*". Also the participants cannot check spelling mistakes. P 02 said: "*we do not have dictionaries in braille, so some words are not familiar to us*". P 01 said that the writing skill was a problem depending on her mood and sometimes she could not write a single word. The reading skill comes next in the level of difficulty. The participants considered the reading skill "*a minor problem*" because of the lack of the reading of adapted study materials. Also, reading required time. The participants could not read as fast as their sighted peers. The listening skill and then the speaking skill were considered the least difficult ones. The participants did not face problems with the listening skill. All the participants agreed that they relied on their auditory channel to acquire new information. The listening skill was majorly used by the participant in their English language learning. They reported that they used the speaking skill to ask for information and clarifications.

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The participants were finally asked about their suggestions to facilitate EFL learning for them. P 02 suggested an upgrade in the level of using assistive and modern technology. He said that university should provide modern technological devices in order to facilitate English learning. He also suggested that there should be special needs training programs for English teachers; because the majority of teachers did not know how to deal with visually impaired students. Also university administrators should make more efforts to meet our special needs. P 03 and P 01 said that university should pay more attention to our needs. P 03 said that *“it should be easy for university to provide special services to meet our needs considering the small number of students with visual impairment”*. She also suggested that the study materials should be more accessible due to their importance to the visually impaired students.

3.2 Questionnaire Analysis

In the first section of the questionnaire, the background data of participants was presented as shown in table 3. In the second section of the questionnaire, teachers' accommodation and experience with visually impaired students are discussed. When the teachers were asked to what extent they considered their special learners' needs, 44.45% of them said “sometimes” while 55.55% said “always”. The type of teaching accommodations and techniques used for visually impaired students are presented in Figure.1

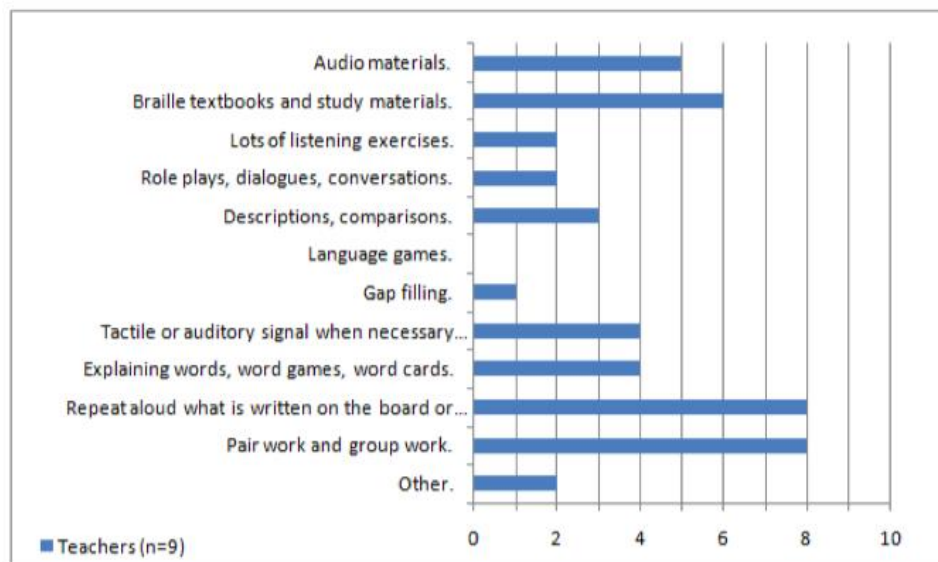


Fig 1. Teachers' Accommodations to Visually Impaired Students

As demonstrated in Figure 1, when teachers were asked about their methods and techniques with visually impaired students, almost the majority of the teachers (8 out of 9) stated that “repeat aloud what is written on the board or presented in

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handouts” and “Pair work and group work” were two techniques they used and found to be effective. Two third of the teachers (6 out of 9) mentioned “Braille textbooks and study materials”. Five out nine teachers (5 out of 9) responded “Audio materials”. “Tactile or auditory signal when necessary instead of a visual cue” and “Explaining words, word games, word cards” were mentioned by four out of nine teachers (4 out of 9) . One third of the teachers (3 out of 9) answered “Descriptions, comparisons”. Two teachers out of nine (2 out of 9) responded “Lots of listening exercises” and “Role plays, dialogues, conversations”. Only one teacher (1 out 9) mentioned “Gap filling”. Two teachers mentioned other techniques and methods they have used and considered effective for teaching EFL students with visual impairment. T 01 responded that she read the instruction of activities. She added that she had recommended the audio format of e-books to her visually impaired students. T 09 mentioned that she had made all the students involved in reading the study materials for the visually impaired students. She added: “They all take turn and have happily contributed.”

When teachers were asked about their challenges with meeting the learning needs of visually impaired students, their answers were summarized in the following notes:

- The absence of required materials and appropriate study equipment.
- Difficulty in providing Braille and reading materials.
- Absence of technological devices

- Some reading techniques cannot be performed by students with visual impairment like skimming.
- Some methods are not appropriate for those students like the use of videos.
- Some language features are hard to teach like the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) and suprasegmental features in phonetics and transcription.
- Some accommodations like repetitions and speaking aloud are time consuming.

○ Assessment of Visually Impaired Students

In this section, teachers were asked about assessing the visually impaired students namely their accommodations and challenges during exams. As for their accommodations, their answers were presented in Table.5

Table.5: Teachers' Accommodations During Exams

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The accommodations	Teachers (n=9)
Braille exam paper	07
Enlarged exam paper	00
Audio-format exam	01
Personal assistant	08
Extra/additional time	03
Other	01

As shown in Table.5, eight teachers (8 out of 9) responded that they had provided “Braille exam papers” to the visually impaired EFL students. Seven teachers (7 out of 9) responded that a personal assistant helped the visually impaired EFL students by reading the questions and reporting the answers. Three teachers (3 out of 9) responded “Extra/additional time”. One teacher (1 out of 9) used “Audio-format exam” with the visually impaired EFL students. T 01, T04, and T 03 mentioned another exam accommodation. All the three teachers responded that they had modified and had excluded some questions. Visually impaired students could not be given long instructions. Also, visually impaired EFL students could not be tested on some language features like “phonetic transcription”.

With regards to the challenges associated with assessing visually impaired students, their teachers reported that the first and foremost problem was that long instructions such couldn't be given to visually impaired students since they cannot benefit from some techniques like skimming, that why teachers have to exclude or limit the questions. Another challenge was related to the personal assistant who write the answers of visually impaired students during exams : they may not be able to jot down the entire answers in certain subjects, and this posed the problem of the need for extra time which not always feasible. Moreover, some language aspects are difficult to teach and to test in addition to the impossibility of checkinng spelling mistakes and the overall form of exam answers in the case of composition writing. The last problem that teachers claimed was subjectivity and personal affections towards the visually impaired EFL students : when they comes to rate the exam answers, teachers were concerned of being unfair with visually impaired students in comparison to their sighted peers.

4. Conclusion

The main goal of this paper was to investigate visually impaired students' experience with EFL learning at tertiary level. The study was set to answer two research questions. As for the first question that sought to explore visually impaired students experience with inclusive education, it was found that though learners demonstrated positive attitudes towards inclusion at university, yet they were faced with many challenges namely the lack of appropriate teaching materials and assistive technological devices that enable them to be autonomous particularly during exams.

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Therefore, the findings of this research were in direct line with previous studies that favoured inclusive learning and called for more accommodation to the teaching and learning materials (Allen and Cowdery, 2011). As for the second question that relates to teachers accommodations for visually impaired students' needs, it was found that their practices were based on their personal perspectives and efforts rather than being based on a special education approach or protocol to meet the needs of this type of learners. These results ties well with Gronlund et al ., (2010) who affirmed that, there were no clear policies and documents on inclusive education and how it should be implemented and that is why general teachers do not acquire sufficient training (Kapinga, 2012). Consequently, the need to train teachers in special education and provide the appropriate technical and pedagogical assistance deemed very important. This study was conducted from the perspective of the visually impaired students, and their EFL teachers at university, further researches may include the classmates of the visually impaired students and other stakeholders like administrators. Future research may consider examining the effects of assistive technology on the academic achievements of the visually impaired students in EFL learning. Researchers may also consider the effect of training teachers in special education on the achievement of learners' with visual impairment.

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