



ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING BY BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED INDIVIDUALS: THE ROLE OF ASSERTIVENESS AND SELF-ADVOCACY IN INCLUSIVE SETTINGS

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Abstract

This study is based on my PhD research and it investigates the issue of self-advocacy and assertiveness by BVI learners in an inclusive settings. This qualitative, phenomenological study employs in-depth interviews as tool for data collection. The purposive sample consisted of fifteen participants, including ten BVI students and their five sighted teachers. The study employs Oliver's (2013) Social Model of Disability to investigate both external and internal factors governing The BVI learners' endeavors to self-advocate and assert themselves in an inclusive classroom. The collected data is transcribed and thematically analysed. This study indicates that the concerned universities fail to provide adequate, systematic self-advocacy training for students with disabilities. This failure is particularly acute for students who spend the majority or entirety of their instructional time in general education settings, where specialized curriculum delivery is often neglected. Educators and administrators do express a desire for students to self-advocate but frequently fail to provide the necessary structure and explicit support required for students to acquire this difficult skill set. The findings suggest that those students comparatively performed better who have these traits as compared with those who lacked them. The BVI students who could share their needs without any hesitation remained largely successful in their English language learning efforts. The study shows that the BVI students, despite confronting various barriers, try to get on with their studies employing their individualized coping mechanisms to overcome these obstacles.

Keywords: *Assertiveness, Blind and Visually Impaired, English Language Learning, Self-Advocacy*

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1. Introduction

Inclusion refers to the notion of becoming a part of a structure (Ashraf et al., 2017). Inclusive education refers to the concept of including students with different needs in regular schools. Such a system ensures the promotion of a culture celebrating differences and similarities. When the notion of differences is also focused upon, it justifies and promotes the concepts of equity and inclusive education. This idea of differences and similarities enables teachers to devise their teaching and evaluation method accordingly. According to Tefera (2005, p. 108), “inclusion requires a lot of struggle and commitment to overcome attitudinal and social barriers.” Though “Education for All” is the motto of the country, creating equal opportunities and ensuring the blind and visually impaired (henceforth “BVI”) students’ participation in an integrated English language class are very limited. Inclusive education provides a chance to the normal people and to the people having disabilities to socialize with each other. It is generally viewed as recognizing the rights of special people by making them a part of mainstream education.

Visual impairment is a broad term. It includes vision loss and deficiencies with varying degrees. Total blindness is the phenomenon wherein individuals have completely lost their vision, i.e. they have no light perception (AFB, 2022). Partially seeing are those who can read large print but generally have to switch over to Brailled materials and talking books like fully blind learners as they experience severe headaches, especially after reading for longer periods of time. Thus, the challenges faced by visually impaired learners in their academic pursuits are by and large similar to those confronted by blind learners.

Generally, all visual impairment has one thing in common: it renders the visually impaired individual print-challenged. Thus, when a person’s vision is deficient to such an extent that she/he can’t function effectively in his academic and daily life, he is declared legally blind and visually impaired (MDE 2020).

BVI learners need special materials, equipment and assistive technology to overcome their sight-related challenges (Bardin & Lewis, 2008). The students depending upon the degree of their impairment have different needs which should be highlighted and brought to the attention of the teachers and administrators. Papadopoulos et al. (2008) assert that visually impaired students cannot practice their language skills, as they can only read and write in Braille. Since they cannot see, they cannot read or write the text normally. For blind people, every image and gesture needs to be translated into words (Attachoo & Sitthitikul, 2020). Teachers and administrators need to be aware of the specialised needs, thereby necessitating assertiveness and self-advocacy on the part of the BVI learners.

To fully comprehend the strategic necessity of independent action for blind and visually impaired (BVI) students, it is vital to distinguish between self-advocacy and assertiveness. Self-advocacy (SA) represents the comprehensive, overarching strategy encompassing the ability to communicate one's specific needs and preferences effectively. This skill enables students to become active, rather than passive, participants in their education and daily lives. SA is a complex combination of four distinct facets: (1) acquiring sufficient knowledge of one's own abilities and needs to recognize problems; (2) achieving preparedness to pursue the fulfillment of these needs; (3) demonstrating the aptitude to communicate those needs to others; and (4) possessing the essential skills, such as assertiveness, to initiate change.

Assertiveness, conversely, is the core interpersonal competence required for the successful execution of the SA strategy. It is defined as the capability of freely advocating for one's rights and needs while concurrently respecting the rights of others within organizational and social relationships. Assertiveness provides the necessary communication skill needed to initiate change (Facet 4), ensuring that the student's requests are clear, respectful, and effective.

Self-advocacy for students with visual impairments is frequently necessitated by systemic shortfalls. Analysis of SA behaviors indicates that a key function is "filling gaps," which describes the actions students must undertake to mitigate perceived limitations in either their formal accommodations or in the instructional practices used by educators. If the formal accommodation system, typically defined by an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), operated perfectly, the need for students to constantly "fill gaps" would be significantly reduced. The practical reality is that the student is often required to function as an accommodation manager, transforming SA from a beneficial competency into an essential labor burden required to compensate for institutional inefficiency.

Furthermore, self-advocacy is widely understood to be a core component of the broader concept of self-determination. Self-determination is not simply an educational goal but is framed as a fundamental human right. By connecting self-advocacy instruction to this foundational right, educational policy gains an ethical imperative. If educational institutions fail to systematically teach SA, they risk undermining a student's foundational capacity to exercise control over their own destiny and affairs as they transition into adulthood.

The recent trends in research for BVI students mainly focus on the teachers' perceptions of services for BVI students in regular classroom environment (Al-Ayoudi, 2006; Wungu & Han, 2008); the impact of blindness on the cognitive abilities of BVI learners with regard to second language learning (Smeds, H., 2015); educating them in

regular classroom settings (Bishaw, 2013; Janae, 2017; Murray, & McKenzie, 2010; Simon, Echeita, Scandoval, & Lopez, 2010); characteristics of their learning styles under the impact of assistive technology (Hussin, 2013; Nguyo, 2015; Padure, 2011); and teachers' competence for teaching BVI students (Smith, Kelley, Maushak, Griffin-Shirley, & Lan, 2009). These and other studies have investigated learning in general by BVI learners from various perspectives, but no study, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, investigating specifically the role of assertiveness and self-advocacy on the part of BVI learners of English in inclusive setting has been done so far, and it is for this reason that the researcher undertook the task of investigating this area. Tobin's (2011) opinion is still valid, who, along with Orini-Jones (2009) and Topor and Rosenblum et al (2013) argued for extensive research into the field of second language learning by BVI individuals.

2. Research Questions

The study seeks answers to the following questions:

- I. How do the BVI students share their special needs in an inclusive setting?
- II. What strategies do they adopt to overcome their sight-related challenges to get on in an inclusive environment?

3. Theoretical Framework

For this research, the Social Model of Disability Theory presented by Mike Oliver (2013) was used. Oliver (2013) was himself a disabled academic, and he coined the term 'social model of disability' in 1983. Initially the model was used for people with physical impairment only. Later, all types of people having different types of impairments which also include people having learning difficulties were included (Oliver, 2013). The framework deals with the barriers faced by visually challenged learners. It divides the barriers into four categories: first, attitudes: second, materials: third, untrained teachers: fourth, financial issues (Nthama & Annie, 2019).

This framework posits that these four factors influence the learning positively or negatively. The negative attitude of the teachers and learners create hindrances and negatively impacts the learners with visual impairment. Materials refer to the Braille, embossed texts, or electric notes. Absence of such materials becomes a hurdle in their learning process. Untrained teachers with no expertise to deal with such students also impact their learning negatively. Further, financial resources refer to the financial reserves that can be used to assist such students. Lack of funds results in a crisis for visually challenged learners. The theoretical framework is highly relevant to the study, as it deals with visual impairment, inclusive education and learning.

The social model of disability posits that the barriers that exist are not the result of the disability; they cannot be attributed to the unsound medical condition of the individual. The disabled individuals face challenges because of the unsound social environment. In other words, it is not their impairment which makes them disabled, rather the social structures render them incapacitated. In the light of this model, impairment is defined as a functional limitation due to mental, physical or sensory conditions that are distinct from regular norms within an individual. Conversely, disability is a restriction caused by an institution, organization or society which excludes individuals based on their impairments from performing and participating in the social activities with their counterparts. Therefore, society imposes disability by not providing opportunities and facilities to the visually challenged learners, thus hindering their participation in the social activities to their full potential. In this way, society –transforms their impairment into disability.

4. Research Methodology

This research studied participants in natural setting in order to arrive at the meanings shared by them. Qualitative research aims to comprehend the way individuals grasp the world around them from their own perspectives, and acknowledges individualised interpretations; both the participants and researcher, in this way, discover (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This study used a qualitative approach because of various reasons, as enumerated by Creswell (2018)): (a) when research questions begin with how, what and why, (b) there are multiple aspects to the issue under study which need investigation, and (c) the study has to be carried out in a natural environment. I believe that the experiences of the BVI students and the reality they construct can be understood through qualitative approach.

For this study, the research population comprised BVI learners of English language, lying between eighteen to twenty-two years age range. A list was obtained of the BVI students who were enrolled in NUML Islamabad and Islamic International Universities at the time of study. Through purposive sampling, five sighted teachers of the blind and ten BVI students were selected. The participants' willingness was ascertained through consent forms.

Semi-structured interview was used for this study, as it was believed that this type of interview could yield maximum relevant data. It also allowed the participants to openly express their opinions at length. A set of questions in line with the research objectives and the main research questions were asked of the study participants during an hour-long interview. The study participants were provided a relaxed and comfortable environment in order to allow them to share their views freely regarding their experiences as BVI learners of English language in accordance with the views of Smith and Osborn (2008), The

researcher, who conducted the interviews himself, provided clues to the participants whenever they got stuck.

A pilot study covering two BVI students was carried out before conducting the main interviews and certain adjustments were made to the interview schedule. Through a laptop and a smartphone, all the interviews were recorded.

During the course of interviews, the teachers used English throughout, whereas the students relied on both Urdu and English. The researcher himself transcribed and translated into English all the interviews. Being a visually impaired person myself, I could easily understand their views and perceive the cultural and contextual nuances imbedded in their responses.

Through thematic analysis, major themes were arrived at, and via such strategies as low-inference descriptors and member check sessions, the reliability and validity of the study was ensured.

5. Data Presentation and Analysis

BVI students often come to universities having little proper understanding of how their disability affects their learning (Brinkerhoff, McGuire, and Shaw, 2002; Getzel and Briel, 2006; Getzel and McManus, 2005). Consequently, they are unable to effectively self-advocate in order to address the academic challenges they confront there. Moreover, BVI students often perceive themselves as unprepared for the increased rigor of university. As a result, they frequently face the challenge of a smooth transition to university environment as well as resilience to complete a degree or certificate (Hilary, 2006). This can result in difficulty with academic expectations and anxiety which often cause minimised retention rates (Connor, 2012; Reed, Kennett, Lewis, Lund -Lucas, Stallberg and Newbold, 2009). Katharine (2007) concluded that an increase in self-advocacy skill was associated with an increase in psychosocial adjustment to disability, institutional attachment, and academic adjustment.

Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997) argued that "self-advocacy skills include learning how to be assertive but not aggressive; how to negotiate, compromise and use persuasion; how to be an effective leader and team member" (p. 253). After analysing and synthesising the hitherto available research and input from stakeholders, Test et al. (2005) identified four components of self-advocacy: knowledge of rights, knowledge of self, communication, and leadership. Knowledge of rights is the BVI individual's information and understanding about his rights as a special citizen. In other words, he knows how to ensure his rights of inclusion in school, higher education institutions and employment, to which he legally entitled (Fielder and Danneker, 2007; Test et al., 2005). Knowledge of

self refers to the BVI individual's understanding of his own strengths and limitations, likes and dislikes, goals and objectives, learning styles and strategies, disability awareness and needs (Fiedler and Danneker, 2007; Test et al., 2005).

All the teacher participants freely expressed their views on the topic of assertiveness and self-advocacy. They were of the view that, for better functioning in an integrated class, the BVI students needed to develop the skills of assertiveness and self-advocacy. The BVI students who proactively seek accommodations to recompense for their disability, according to Brinckerhoff (1991), are more likely to achieve academic success as compared with those who fail to do so. Those BVI students who possessed good self-advocacy skills, as this study revealed, not only made their language learning experience much more effective and enjoyable for themselves, but also gave their teachers the scope for adjusting their teaching style according to their needs. The blind student's ability to make his/her needs known is crucial to a successful working relationship between them and their teachers.

Almost all student participants termed assertiveness and self-advocacy as very important for achieving success in the regular classroom environment. All of them stated that it was mandatory for the BVI students to inform the regular classroom teachers about their special needs, as very few of the teachers might have very little knowledge of visual impairment or the needs of a visually impaired student. Lack of proper communication on the part of the BVI students might have serious consequences for them, as their sighted teachers might wrongly assume that whatever they are doing, without taking the special needs of the BVI students into account, was working fine for them.

Some teachers might have certain preconceived notions about the blind student's capabilities. It is the BVI students' responsibility to dispel any erroneous notions held by their sighted teachers regarding them and their potential through self-advocacy. Moreover, it is also essential for them to apprise their teachers of any blindness-related problems and mutually arrive at some viable solution to those challenges.

Miss Aneela said that initially she did not verbalize the written material and give no description of diagrams, tables and charts because she received no training on how to accommodate the BVI students and was hence unaware of their special needs. Her BVI student suggested that if she accompanied the visuals with descriptions, it would be very helpful for him. "He requested me to present the material orally for his sake so that he could learn it just like her sighted students." Thus, her BVI student made his language learning experience much more fruitful for himself.

Self-advocacy on the part of the BVI students is especially important for their academic success in an integrated classroom setting because, as Valdevieso and Hartman

(1991) argue, the majority of sighted teachers and administrators are generally unaware of how to accommodate a visually challenged student. This claim made by Valdevieso and Hartman (1991) was confirmed by this study. In situations where the BVI students fail to apprise their sighted teachers of their special needs, they could not perform to their full potential in an integrated classroom setting, as the teachers would be unable to properly accommodate them. These students pose considerable challenges both for their teachers as well as for themselves as their teachers are simply unaware of their needs and hence, they do not know how to accommodate them. Mr. Hamid, for example, tried to extract something out of his student in terms of his needs, but to no avail. "I gave my blind student every opportunity to inform me about his needs so that I could accommodate him, but he remained silent and said nothing. I was left wondering with regard to his needs. How could I accommodate his needs if I didn't know them in the first place?"

But there is a thin line between arrogance and self-advocacy which the BVI students sometimes cross. At times, the manner in which the BVI students expressed their needs tantamount to sarcasm or arrogance. Allowances could be made for such behaviour as, on account of their deprivation, the BVI students are often on the defensive and suffer from low self-esteem.

Similarly, a distinction needs to be made between self-advocacy and over-dependence. The BVI students must not over-depend on others, as it might put off their peers and teachers. They should try to be as independent as possible and should seek the help of others only when it is absolutely needed, and they fear of getting stuck. Moreover, they should always be in a position to give something in return. It can be a small favour in the form of a gift, some academic help, or even an expression of "thanks" with a pleasant smile. These small gestures go a long way in establishing good interpersonal relationship with the sighted peers and teachers. Asking for favours all the time without paying them back in some form often result in turning a BVI student into a liability, someone people prefer to avoid.

It is the BVI student's duty to explicitly inform his regular classroom teacher about any accommodation-related needs and concerns her/himself, instead of waiting for the university's administration to take measures on his behalf. My own experience shows that people in the administration generally know very little about blindness and blindness-related issues. Thus, relying on their help to advocate for you is a sure recipe for disaster. I have observed that the majority of sighted people have compassionate hearts and are always willing to help, but they simply don't know how to assist us. Sighted peers and teachers are generally very forth-coming with their assistance, so instead of holding them responsible for their problems, the BVI individuals should take the initiative and reach out to them.

Brinckerhoff (1991) and Spiers (1992) state that the BVI students should thoroughly describe their handicap to their teachers as well as offer recommendations about how to accommodate their specialized needs. But Fichten et al (1988) caution that mere description of one's disability to one's teacher is not sufficient, and terms effective self-advocacy as essential for academic success. He argues that a blind student does not need to provide a detailed explanation of his/her visual handicap, as it could make those individuals feel overwhelmed who deal with the blind student in regular classroom setting. What is necessary for a blind student, Fichten et al (1988) state, is just to inform his teacher what he can and cannot do in a regular academic setting. It means that the BVI students not only have to educate themselves, but also undertake the task of educating others with regard to their disability-related needs.

6. Major Findings

All the study participants unanimously agreed that assertiveness and self-advocacy on the part of the BVI students played a crucial role in their success in an integrated classroom setting. This study established that self-advocacy and assertiveness were even more important in integrated classroom settings at the university level where no proper support system for accommodating the BVI students' needs existed. It was found to be absolutely essential for the BVI students to inform their regular classroom teachers about their special needs because they had very little knowledge of visual impairment and the needs of a visually impaired student. In such situations, lack of proper communication about their needs could have serious consequences for BVI students, as their sighted teachers could wrongly assume that whatever they were doing was working fine for them. It emerged during the course of this study, however, that all the BVI students were not equally aware in terms of using the proper means for achieving assertiveness and self-advocacy.

This study revealed that those students, like Ahmad, Farooq, Sami, Hassan, Saima and Sadia, who did not hesitate to communicate their special needs to their sighted teachers were comparatively more successful than those, like Arshad, who failed to do so. Self-advocacy on the part of the BVI students is especially important for their academic success in an integrated classroom setting because the majority of sighted teachers and administrators, as this study revealed, were generally unaware of how to accommodate a visually challenged student. As this study established, they generally use the same techniques which are employed for teaching English language to sighted students. Failing to adapt their teaching style and accommodate the BVI students in regular classes could result in disastrous consequences for the BVI learners. The BVI students should, therefore,

not only be familiar with their rights outlined in various laws, but also learn how to seek accommodations for their disability-related needs.

Some teachers might have certain preconceived notions about the blind student's capabilities. It is the BVI students' responsibility to dispel any erroneous notions held by their sighted teachers regarding them and their potential through self-advocacy. Moreover, it is also essential for them to apprise their teachers of any blindness-related problems and mutually arrive at some viable solution to those challenges.

The visually challenged students should never refrain from offering suggestions on how their disability-related needs may best be accommodated. Those BVI students who failed to advocate for the accommodation of their specialized needs found it hard to succeed in the regular classroom environment. Sanan, for example, lacked the skill of self-advocacy and assertiveness and it had serious consequences for him. "Because my blind student did not make me aware of his needs", Mr. Hamid stated, "I did not know how to accommodate him."

This study shows that the required scope and intensity of self-advocacy instruction depend significantly on the onset of the visual impairment. When vision loss is congenital (present from birth), the impact on development and learning is typically more pervasive. These students require explicit, systematic instruction to build foundational concepts, language, and independent living skills that sighted peers acquire incidentally.

A significant risk in this population is the development of "learned helplessness," which occurs when caregivers, out of concern or convenience, consistently perform tasks for the child, leading to over-dependence. Learned helplessness is antithetical to self-advocacy and self-determination. If a student never acquires the basic skills of daily living, they fundamentally lack the "knowledge of one's abilities and needs" (Facet 1 of SA) required to communicate those needs effectively in an academic or workplace setting. Therefore, early curriculum design and parent education must proactively counter over-scaffolding.

For those with adventitious vision loss (acquired later in life), the student often retains a foundation of visual concepts, social understanding, and prior learning, though they may require significant training in adaptation, resource utilization, and Orientation and Mobility (O&M) to regain independence. Advocacy instruction for this group may focus more on the emotional adjustment to change and the assertive communication required to utilize accommodations within an already established educational trajectory.

The study also established that the environment of the inclusive classroom frequently failed to proactively support BVI students, transforming self-advocacy into a

mandatory, punitive exercise. Explaining one's disability involves an inherent vulnerability, especially when communicating with figures of authority such as teachers or professors, making the required disclosure intimidating and anxiety-provoking for many students.

Compounding this difficulty were instances of instructor non-compliance or negligence. Students reported cases where faculty actively discouraged the use of accommodations or failed to respond to timely requests, thereby hindering the student's efforts at self-advocacy. Whether unintentional or blatant, this negligence forced students to shoulder the additional cognitive and emotional labor of follow-up communication and negotiation. The consequence of this institutional failure was often reliance on self-accommodation, where the disabled individual avoided the formal accommodation process and took on the labour themselves. This practice is viewed as a failure of civil rights law, as the difficulty of obtaining accommodations undermines the anti-discrimination intent of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Legally, institutions are responsible for administering accommodations; however, the practical burden is often unjustly placed on the student to negotiate and manage the entire logistical process.

7. Recommendations for the BVI Students

The BVI students should familiarise themselves with their rights outlined in various laws and learn how to seek accommodations for their disability-related needs. Moreover, they should be assertive and indulge in self-advocacy and inform their regular classroom teachers about their special needs without any hesitation in order to apprise them about their special needs and dispel any wrong notions which they might have about BVI students. Similarly, they also need to apprise their sighted peers about their needs and take them into confidence so as to ensure their cooperation and assistance in the regular class. The BVI students should avoid being over-reliant on their sighted peers and teachers. This study shows that dependence upon others for the achievement of academic objectives is always problematic and should, therefore, be avoided. Thus obtaining the ability to function independently in terms of their academic activities should be the cherished goal of every BVI learner. Finally, they should develop the capacity to give something in return in case they are required to seek someone's assistance (in the form of academic help) instead, and thus develop an atmosphere of mutual cooperation in the regular class.

BVI students rely on a diverse range of specialized technologies, including screen readers, magnification software, braille displays, and visual interpreting services. The student must assertively communicate their technical proficiency, including which specific operating systems and AT tools they are comfortable and effectively using, since assumptions about their needs can lead to inappropriate accommodation provision.

Advocacy is required at critical breakdown points related to material accessibility. This includes requesting specific digital file formats compatible with their screen reader, dictating text input methods (typing vs. dictation), and demanding advanced preparation for accommodations such as hard copy braille or tactile drawings for math and science courses. Furthermore, students must assert the need for image descriptions, audio descriptions for video content, or in-class assistants for settings like laboratory work. A student must be able to assert, with confidence and knowledge, precisely how and why a specific technological solution is required.

8. Conclusions

The analysis confirms that assertiveness and self-advocacy are not optional supplementary skills but are fundamental, necessary competencies required for BVI students to achieve educational equity and competitive university outcomes in an inclusive environment. The requirement for BVI students to assertively advocate is elevated by systemic failures, transforming SA into a labor-intensive, gap-filling mechanism rather than a straightforward request for rights. To address this complex challenge, reform is required across policy, pedagogical practice, and curriculum implementation.

Mandate ECC Integration and Fidelity: Educational authorities must mandate and monitor the systematic instruction of the Self-Determination component of the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) within the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), ensuring BVI students in inclusive settings receive targeted advocacy training throughout their school careers.

Streamline Accommodation Processes: Institutions must reduce or eliminate excessive and punitive documentation requirements for accommodation requests and strengthen confidentiality protocols around disability status. This measure is necessary to alleviate disclosure concerns and ease the burden placed on students.

Enforce Burden Shift: The legal and administrative responsibility for negotiating and administering accommodations must be rigorously enforced upon higher educational institutions, thereby reducing reliance on student self-accommodation, which undermines the intent of anti-discrimination laws.

Mandatory Teacher Training: Professional development for general education teachers must include training on modeling assertive communication, recognizing and effectively mitigating disability-related microaggressions, and understanding the profound developmental role of SA for BVI student success.

Prioritize Foundational Technology Skills: Early education must ensure that BVI students receive rigorous, standardized instruction in foundational computer skills,

including typing and operating system proficiency, to ensure they can competently utilize and advocate for the complex assistive technology required in higher education and employment.

9. Future Research Directions

Future research should focus on quantifying the long-term impact of explicit ECC self-determination instruction on competitive employment rates for BVI adults. Additionally, studies are needed to identify and test proactive pedagogical interventions designed to counteract systemic disability stigma within inclusive classroom settings, thereby increasing students' willingness to engage in necessary self-advocacy.

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