



CHALLENGES IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE FOR VISUALLY IMPAIRED AND PARTIALLY DEAF LEARNERS IN TERTIARY EDUCATION BASED ON ‘THE GUIDE FOR INCLUSIVE TEACHING AT COLOMBIA’

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Facilitating learning of English among visually impaired and partially deaf learners is a challenge due to the inherent restrictions of learner capabilities. Pedagogically known choice of Special Needs Education is not concerned positively with regard to the humanistic approach brought forward by Inclusive Pedagogy. At the same time, what is said in theory is not always applicable for practical concerns. The practical application of Inclusive Pedagogy is demanding provided the fact that every learner with or without disabilities should equally benefit. This study is based on a qualitative study of the “Guide for Inclusive Teaching at Colombia (2017)”, which reinforces the challenges faced by teachers when teaching English at university level for visually impaired and partially deaf learners. It also focuses on the expert view on overcoming such challenges and the practical aspect of it. Finally, this study indicates that both, Inclusive Pedagogy and Special Needs Education are important and have their own benefits for learners who are visually impaired and partially deaf. Special Needs Education promotes the opportunity for customized quality learning while Inclusive Pedagogy promotes inclusion and wholesome experiences. The results of this study encourage the English as a Secondary Language (ESL) practitioners to create a fine balance between Inclusive Pedagogy and Special Needs Education to seek paths to overcome challenges when teaching English for visually impaired and partially deaf learners.

Keywords: Inclusive Pedagogy, Special Needs Education

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INTRODUCTION

Visually impaired and partially deaf learners are categorized as learners who require Special Needs Education. In contrast to Special Needs Education is Inclusive Pedagogy, which does not promote segregation and allows physically, psychologically and socially diverse learners to learn together. The concerns of Inclusive Pedagogy, Special Needs Education and how each model can facilitate the engagement in learning English can unravel the strategies that make learning English an enthusiastic task for visually impaired and partially deaf learners. The biggest hindrance for that is the inherent differences of learner capacity, which make teaching a daunting task. This research is undertaken to gain the awareness of strategic viewpoints which are accessible and practical in finding solutions for the challenges faced when teaching English for visually impaired and partially deaf learners.

The two approaches of Inclusive Pedagogy and Special Needs Education have been long established in the education system for teaching learners who are visually impaired and partially deaf.

Inclusive Pedagogy convincingly integrates differences of learners and learning opportunities. The integral concern here is to implement learning opportunities which respond to the differences of learners. Inclusive Pedagogy becomes significant as it serves the purpose of centralizing the sense of welcoming to fit the differences of learners by providing a humanistic approach towards learning. UNESCO on the “World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality” held in Salamanca, Spain, 1994 issued the Salamanca Statement, which has rightfully indicated the importance of Inclusive Pedagogy by stating the fact that,

‘The challenge confronting the inclusive school is that of developing a child-centered pedagogy capable of successfully educating all children, including those who have serious disadvantages and disabilities. The merit of such schools is not only that they are capable of providing quality education to all children; their establishment is a crucial step in helping to change discriminatory attitudes, in creating welcoming communities and in developing an inclusive society’. (UNESCO, 1994)

Inclusive Pedagogy is indeed deep in its representation of inclusion. The depth of this concept is depicted by Waitoller and Articles (2013) by demonstrating a clear link between inclusion and participation of learners. Accordingly, Inclusive Education was introduced to oppose the discrimination created by the Special Needs Education.

Special Needs Education aims to foster learning for those who are excluded from the category of average or abled learners, by adhering to specific practices and methodologies. Special Education has made a feasible approach to assist learners by centralizing the individual learner differences. As Holmberg and Jeyaprathaban (2006) have stated, ‘Special Needs Education encompasses heterogeneous groups who demand varied services such as visually impaired, hearing impaired, mentally retarded, orthopedic handicapped...’



The related literature of Inclusive Pedagogy is important to understand the concepts, concerns and norms related to teaching. ‘The Guide for Inclusive Teaching at Colombia’, with its five principles, also discusses strategies that assist in maximizing the practicability of principles.

‘The Guide for Inclusive Teaching at Colombia’ defines Inclusive Pedagogy giving weight for student perception. They believe in ‘creating an inclusive teaching environment’ which is ‘beneficial for all students’ learning.’

There are five principles in the ‘The Guide for Inclusive Teaching in Colombia’.

Principle 1 - Establish and support a class climate that fosters belonging for all students

Principle 2 - Set explicit student expectations

Principle 3 - Select course content that recognizes diversity and acknowledges barriers to inclusion

Principle 4 - Design all course elements for accessibility

Principle 5 - Reflect on one’s beliefs about teaching to maximize self-awareness and commitment to inclusion

Taking ‘The Guide for Inclusive Teaching at Colombia’ as a theoretical foundation, this research aims to study how each principle can be utilized to seek solutions for the challenges faced in teaching English for visually impaired and partially deaf learners.

This research attempts to examine the question of ‘How do the Tertiary English as a Second Language (ESL) professionals view the five principles stated in “The Guide for Inclusive Teaching at Colombia”, as an instrument which can possibly provide solutions for the challenges faced in teaching English of visually impaired and partially deaf learners?’

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study based on the “Guide for Inclusive Teaching at Colombia (2017).” This study was a qualitative research based on the professional perspective of three ESL professionals, attached to a Department of English Language Teaching of a Sri Lankan state university. A semi structured interview was used to obtain the insights of the research problem. The three ESL professionals were selected based on the ground of contemporary experience since they were teaching the visually impaired and partially deaf learners in separate groups at that moment. Two of them preferred responding verbally while one teacher opted to send written answers for the questions.

The questions in the semi structured interview were aimed at searching the professional views and norms about the five principles of “The Guide for Inclusive Teaching at Colombia” and how it supports facing the challenges in teaching English for undergraduates who are visually impaired, and partially deaf.

This semi structured interview was directed according to the methodology of deductive data analysis. The questions were categorized under the five principles of (a) establish and support a class climate that fosters belonging for all students (b) set explicit student expectations (c) select course content that recognizes diversity and acknowledges barriers to inclusion (d) design all course elements for accessibility and (e) reflect on one’s beliefs about teaching to maximize self-awareness and commitment to inclusion.

The responses of the three ESL professionals were meticulously analysed to find the foremost challenges faced when teaching such learners and an in-depth study was conducted to seek solutions taking feasibility into consideration.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When concerning learners who are under Special Needs Education, an empathetic approach to settle the class for learning is an absolute requirement. One main challenge faced by the teachers is to instill a positive self-image of oneself. One ESL professional believed in not bringing up or even hinting about the differences between the learners and herself, and only adapting herself to their way of learning. The students get rid of any inhibition when their individual differences are accepted and acknowledged. At the same time, they feel that they are not being specially treated or favoured based on the ground of the disability. This further elucidates the fact that how a teacher should be able to connect with the exact emotions or mindset of such learners with the strength of character to avoid being over-stimulated.

The three participants believed in talking to students openly about the expected code of behaviour, rules and regulations in class on the first day itself. This is in fact a very important strategy since the students get convinced of their own responsibility in learning as adult learners. The set routines enhance the autonomy of adult students.

The next challenge is the set curriculum which is not especially designed to fit the purpose of visually impaired and partially deaf students. Conveying the same level of confidence in the abilities of all the students is often practiced in the classrooms. It is also an important strategy stated in “The Guide for Inclusive Teaching at Colombia.” As a specific strategy a lot of visual aids are used when teaching partially deaf students while focusing more on speaking and listening aspects with visually impaired learners. Such approaches facilitate quality interaction. The second teacher reinforces “doing activities according to the time, mood, and environment while being patient and practical”. The participants have experienced how visually impaired and partially deaf learners interact well in activities when the teacher can be very patient. In that case, setting specific time limits should be avoided, since it is over-demanding from the perspective of students. One practitioner said that talking at a very slow pace has helped the visually impaired and partially deaf learners to grasp the meaning clearly, thus she mindfully adjusts to a slow pace.

The feedback is considered essential since it is the evidence of success or failure in a teaching and learning context. The teachers use specific strategies for that. The participants make a conscious effort to know about the student's expectations by asking questions and letting them write about their own expectations. In fact, one participant took time from everyday lessons to get feedback from students to assure whether the teaching has met the student expectations. When giving feedback to students, the first participant provided the feedback as “individual and specific” as much as possible, while addressing only the common mistakes as a group. The second participant used the voice messages to provide feedback for visually impaired learners and write or type the feedback for partially deaf learners. The learners also can come and meet the teacher and work on personal contact hours. Both second and third participants found it difficult to provide feedback for visually impaired learners since they use the Braille system. The teachers do not know the Braille system, and they do not have shadow teachers to assist them either. This limitation made them feel restricted as they can only provide feedback on writing by listening to what the learner has written when it comes to visually impaired students. The teachers cannot get a clear idea about spellings or grammar knowledge of students. Even though the teachers do not know the sign language to provide feedback for partially deaf learners, the learners are quite good at lip reading; therefore, providing feedback for partially deaf learners is not as challenging as providing feedback for visually impaired learners who use the Braille system. Yet, how effective the lip reading is still questionable because there is no way to prove whether feedback has got registered accurately or not.



The participants clearly believed that teaching visually impaired and partially deaf learners must be done differently than teaching the learners who are not visually impaired or partially deaf. The learners have their own limitations regarding the pace of learning. As they have observed, it normally takes some time for visually impaired and partially deaf learners to learn, thus specific strategies are a must. The other main limitation is that the teachers do not have customized course materials for these learners. They have found out that activities which require discussing and presenting are not suitable for visually impaired learners.

CONCLUSION

Special Needs Education is preferred among ESL instructors than Inclusive Pedagogy as it allows visually impaired and partially deaf learners to obtain quality education. The severity of the disability too is an important factor as minor visual, or hearing disabilities do not make the learners incapable of attending regular classes with the other learners. Special Needs Education is an advantage for learners who require it. Inclusive Pedagogy may not be efficient enough to achieve the quality of education, mainly due to the lack of human resources. Substituting Special Needs Education with Inclusive Pedagogy and limited resources is not prudent either. Besides, it is unsure whether Inclusive Pedagogy is equally capable of providing quality education for learners who require special needs in education by nature. The best way to bridge this gap is to reform the attitudes of all stockholders attached to education to accept the differences and facilitate opportunities to embrace the differences. Customized materials along with specialized professional support should be implemented to bridge this gap.



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