THE CHALLENGES THAT VISUALLY-IMPAIRED STUDENTS AT SULTAQN QABOOS UNIVERSITY FACE IN LEARNING ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

English language learning is essential for the visually-impaired population to be better integrated into society. This paper investigates the challenges that visually-impaired students at SQU encounter when learning English. Specifically, it investigates the four English language skills (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, and writing). The paper reviews the literature in this area in order to: define literacy for the visually-impaired; explore English language acquisition for the visually-impaired and shed light on the different challenges students encounter in acquiring these skills. The findings of the data were acquired using a questionnaire circulated among eighteen visually-impaired students who have studied English courses at SQU, as well as an interview with an instructor who has experience in teaching visually-impaired students. The findings indicate that the students face difficulties in all four skill areas, with writing being the most challenging. The paper concludes with recommendations to reduce these challenges for visually impaired students in learning English at SQU.

Field of research: visually-impaired, blind, low vision, English learning acquisition, English language skills, challenges.

1. Introduction

Due to the incredible changes that are happening every minute in this globalized world and the need to have a communication tool, the English language has become the access key of this world. Individuals with visual impairments should take advantage of learning a second language, as it would help them to have more chances as well as enriching their integration into society. Thus, an issue about the learning acquisition of ELLs with visual impairment has been raised lately: how can they process learning? And what are the obstacles they go through in their learning process. It can be concluded from the scarce existing literature concerning second language acquisition in visually-impaired students that Blindness itself doesn't block acquiring a second language through appropriate teaching strategies that focus on the other senses and elaborate on them in second language acquisition (e.g., Topor & Rosenblum, 2013; Aikin Araluce, 2002); quite to the contrary, visually-impaired students are challenged by the fact they have to conform to the traditional methods of teaching process and the inadequacy of the learning materials.

2. The Learning Acquisition of Visually-Impaired Students

According to Aikin Araluce (2002), visual impairment is a general term that refers to significant loss of vision. The level of visual impairment ranges from severe short-sightedness to blindness. There are more than 285 million people with visual impairment in the world (WHO, 2012). Webster et al. (2013) state that 80% of what we observe, understand and remember depends on the competence of the visual system. Also, Warren (1989) clarifies that knowledge and literacy for normal individuals...
is gained in the early years of life, as children learn through observation by using their vision system to learn and imitate what others do; this is what has been defined as "Incidental learning" (as cited in Topor & Rosenblum, 2013, p.57). Warren believes that visually-impaired children's literacy is extremely affected by the absence of vision. He explains that this population of children has many challenges acquiring knowledge of the outside world and this will affect their "conceptual development" (p.35). In addition, Conroy (2005) supports the idea that this population has problems in learning progress and literacy. He claims that the literacy of a sighted child cannot be compared to a visually-impaired child because they take a long circuitous route in learning as a result of the lack of rich pictures that enhance learning in the early years. Warren (1989), Webster et al. (2013), and Conroy (2005) reach the conclusion that children with visual impairment literacy deviate negatively from the normal path. However, Akini Araluce (2002) holds the opposite thought about the literacy of students with visual impairment. She believes that the learning process of students with visual impairment is flexible; consequently, there is a fair amount of balance when a sense is missing. In the absence of vision, strategies differ from those by sighted children that are used for acquiring certain language abilities. Also Couper (1996) agrees that students with visual impairment have a strong listening sense that helps them to gain information and organize thoughts orally.

3. Language challenges of Visually-Impaired Students

There is a lack of material in the area of second language acquisition for visually-impaired learners, perhaps due to the well-known assumption that students with visual impairment follow the same path of learning as the sighted students. As far as there is proficiency in the mother language acquisition, a second language will be assimilated successfully (Dunlea, 1989). However, there has been a heated debate among scholars about second language acquisition. Apparently, the first study which was published about visual impairment and second language acquisition is Morrissey's article in 1931. The blind teacher Morrissey (1931), claims that students with visual impairment, especially blind, are well prepared to learn a foreign language regarding their hearing sense which he thinks is the fundamental concept of learning a second language with very little or no relation to vision. Therefore, Morrissey's suggestion to master a second language is to have a well-trained ear that guarantees the perfection in second language learning. Larsen-Freeman (1991) supports the claim of Morrissey by stating that oral and hearing sensitivity tend to be used to a much greater extent for visually-handicapped individuals than their sighted counterparts as well as their intensive memory training that helps them to have an alternative tool instead of vision system in learning. Moreover, Erin (2003) believes that language acquired through asking questions enhances the verbal skills as asking about things they cannot see not only improves visually impaired students' language acquisition but also their overall knowledge ability. He also asserts that the basic fundamental component of learning is learning words and enhancing vocabulary which adds points to the sensitivity memory that this population has.

Nevertheless, Dunlea (1989) insist that students with visual impatient don’t follow the same route in acquiring a new language. She conducted a study to investigate the significant differences between visually-impaired and sighted children's early language. She concluded from her study's findings that visually-impaired children use the language mechanically and without any sense of creativeness. English language has been assigned as the global language nowadays. Thus, there is desperate need for students with visual impairment to learn English to be integrated more in the society. Many scholars conducted studies in the field of English as a Second Language (ESL) and visually-impaired students. The major challenge that visually impaired students face is in learning the four language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking in the study conducted by Mercer and Mercer (1985), (as cited in Hesketch, 1999, p.5).
3.1 Listening and Speaking Challenges

There is nearly overall agreement among researchers that students with visual impairment don’t have any serious problems associated to listening and speaking English skills. In fact, listening is the primary learning method for blind students and a strong helpful tool for visually-impaired students (Topor & Rosenblum, 2013). These students significantly rely on auditory data, so they are required to become skillful listeners to surface listening and speaking skills to analyze the incoming data including facts, figures, and details. Speaking is also an important skill that allows them to request the information needed and even transfer the information to others (Couper, 1996).

3.2 Reading and Writing Challenges

As ELL learners, visually-impaired students must learn reading, to improve their knowledge, and writing, to reflect their knowledge. However, because reading and writing skills are most often skills thought to involve visual abilities to acquire them, students with visual impairment face many challenges in learning theses skills. In fact, visually-impaired students read slower than their sighted peers as they commonly identify words at a letter level instead of a complete word level, which makes students pause frequently while they are reading. Moreover, students face difficulties in sentence structures and organizing ideas in essays, their writing tasks tend to be as "spoken texts" (Orisini-Jones (2009) p.3.1).

4. Methodology

4.1 Sample and data collection method

Eighteen visually-impaired students who have taken English courses in their academic years in the Language Center at Sultan Qaboos University was the focus of this study based on a statistics record that contains the total number of visually-impaired students with their personal information at SQU received from the Administration and Registration. Questionnaire was the primary data collection of this study. A total of 18 questionnaires were collected. To fill the questionnaire, students were asked to precisely identify their perception about their difficulties in acquiring English skills in each statement. The confidentiality of answers was insisted on. Each student had 15 minutes for filling the questionnaire. SPSS-16v was used for data analysis.

Table 1. Demography of the survey respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vision impairment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Blind</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low vision</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
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4.2 Instrumentation

4.2.1 Questionnaire instrument
For this type of research, it is important to consider qualitative more than quantitative data collection methods. The questionnaire used in this research paper consists of four parts: the first part is background information, to give a general overview about the respondents’ gender, type of vision impairment, and the numbers of years of being visually-handicapped. Also, the students are required to indicate the most challenging skill (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, and writing). The second section is made up of two agreements scales, “Listening and speaking challenges” and “Reading and writing challenges”. Each agreement scale carries a list of seven-scale questions that are meant to measure to what extent the students face difficulties in learning the four English language skills (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and their understanding of the challenges they face in each skill. The questionnaire concludes with two open-ended questions. The first question seeks to find the most difficult skill and identify the difficulty. The second question aims to find what type of assistive technology students prefer in reading, Braille or screen reader.

4.2.3 Interview instrument

Besides the questionnaire, an interview has been used as a data collection tool. The semi structured interview provided a background about the instructor; capturing her many years of experience as an instructor for English visually-impaired students learners. It also paves the way to the second part of the interview, where seven items have mostly targeted the instructor’s own perceptions about the challenges visually-impaired students go through in English courses. In the interview, the participant was asked about “the most challenging skill; teacher’s responsibilities; appropriate teaching methods; and the role of assistive technologies in enhancing the visually-impaired learning” in a desire to develop a deep profile of the participants’ beliefs about teaching and learning of this population.

5. Finding & Discussion

5.1 Reliability analysis

The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient value for all variables in the study revealed a range of coefficient value from .78 to .82 accordingly. The dependent variable of each skill scale had a high reliability coefficient of .82 as compared to the independent variables.

5.2 Descriptive statistics & analysis

After conducting the questionnaire and analyzing the data, this study concludes with the finding of the main question “What are the challenges that visually-impaired students at SQU face in learning English?” The first part of the questionnaire has been analysed in order to provide sufficient background information about the research participants. The remaining parts, agreement scales alongside the two open-ended questions, have been divided in the four skills sections, listening, speaking, reading, and writing challenges.
In part one of the questionnaire, personal information, participants were asked to choose the most difficult skill they have to deal with when learning English. Figure 1 shows that almost half of the respondents reported that the writing is the most challenging skill with 44%, while reading comes second with 24%. Participants consider speaking less challenging than reading and writing with 17% and listening skill is the least challenging skill among them.

5.2 Major Findings

1) Students with visual impairment don’t follow the same route in learning as hearing sense is the fundamental concept of learning
2) Students with visual impairment are well prepared to learn a foreign language regardless the absence of vision sense.
3) Writing skill is the most challenging while reading comes second. Speaking is considered less challenging, and listening skill is the least challenging skill among them.
4) There is nearly overall agreement among researchers that students with visual impairment don’t have any serious problems associated to listening and speaking English skills
5) Visually-impaired students face a great challenges in acquiring reading and writing skills more than their sighted counterparts
6) There are other variables that affect acquiring the four fundamental English language skills (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) such as; class room environment, the accessibility of the materials, and teachers awareness of the appropriate strategies

5.3 Specific findings:

1) Listening Challenges
   A. Listening skill is considered the least challenging skill for the visually-impaired Students with visual impairment feel motivated to learn through listening rather than any other English skills
B. Students with visual impairment feel motivated to learn through listening rather than any other English skills

In the first agreement scale of the questionnaire, the listening and speaking challenges scale, statement number 1, “I find listening tasks easy”, directly targeted the respondents to measure listening challenges. 66% of the respondents apparently don’t have any difficulty in listening, whereas only 11% refuted this statement. The result of this statement primarily proves with statement number 2, “I feel motivated to learn through listening rather than depending on other skills”, as 50% strongly agree, 34% agree, 8% neutral, and only 8% disagree. These results support the multiple choice question answer sheets in figure 1, where listening has been categorized as the least challenging skill for visually-impaired Omani students. This is positively correlated with the result of the Topor & Rosenblum (2013) study that states listening as the primary learning method for blind students and an important tool for low vision students.

2) Speaking Challenges.

A. The visually-impaired don’t face any difficulties in speaking English; however, they need to be motivated to speak in classes as they tend to be more sensitive than their sighted peers.

In statement number 5 (I find speaking in English easy), half the participants agree that speaking is not a major problem. On the contrary, 16% disagree that speaking in English is easy and 28% give a neutral opinion. In figure 1, speaking is considered the second least challenging skill for Omani visually-impaired students; however, the fact that 31% of the respondents have given a neutral opinion to the fourth statement, (I feel comfortable to speak in English classes), along with the 32% who have strongly disagreed, makes the result fuzzy which gives a hint that maybe there are other challenges, such as psychological factors that make it difficult to speak English in classes. These pupils tend to be more sensitive and fragile than sighted pupils which may affect their participation in mainstream classes such as at SQU where blind and low vision students feel insecure and less confident participating and speaking in English. In Donley’s article (2002), he claims that visually-impaired students compared to their sighted peers may be less intelligible in speaking classes due to the fact that they may overlook the non-verbal context.
3) Reading challenges.

A. The visually-impaired students read slower than their sighted peers.
B. The majority of the visually-impaired prefer using Braille rather than any other assistive technologies

In figure 1, the participants have categorized reading skills as the second most challenging skill. Figure 4 illustrates almost the same responses as 39% of the participants in statement number 10, “I find reading easy”, disagree that reading is an easy skill for them, 11% strongly disagree, 28% agree, 11% strongly agree, and 11% gave neutral opinion. Also, the researcher tried to identify some reading difficulties that are mentioned in the literature reviews and investigated whether they existed for SQU students. For example, in statement number 10, “I feel that my reading speed is slower than my sighted counterparts”, most of them (73%) report that their speed compared to their sighted peers is very slow. This result is compatible with many researchers (e.g., NARAP, 2011; Erin, 2003; Hesketch,1999) as they agree that visually-impaired students read slower than their sighted peers. Braille reading has been widely used among students with visual impairment (NARAP,2011) but some researchers (e.g., Erin, 2003; Hesketch,1999) still hold the view that students should abandon using traditional paper-reliant Braille and use other assistive technology, such as: cassette recorders, paperless Braille machines, and low vision aids with regular print. The questionnaire attempts to measure students’ satisfaction with using Braille. In open-ended question number two “Do you prefer using Braille or other assistive technology like screen reader or magnifier? and why?” The majority of respondents (75%) prefer using Braille as the primary tool for reading more than other assistive technologies, claiming “I like using Braille because I am using it since my child”, “I like using Braille for English reading, it help me to save spelling”, “Screen reader is very fast and I can’t catch up the words but Braille is good,” and “Braille is better than screen reader because I can know the letters and spelling.” On the contrary, 9% prefer using screen reader in English as it helps them to pronounce the words correctly “I likes using screen reader in English better than Braille because it help me to pronounce the words because Braille is slow and confusing.”
4) **Writing challenges**

A. Writing skill has been categorized as the most challenging skill for visually-impaired students.

B. This population tends to have fuzzy sentence structure with multifarious spelling and grammar mistakes, as their writing tends to be as "spoken texts".

![Figure 5 “I find writing easy”](image)

Writing skill has been categorized in figure 1 at the most challenging skill for visually-impaired English learners at SQU. The response analysis to statement number 11 in figure 5, “I find writing easy”, indicates that the majority of the respondents conform to the notion that writing is challenging; 39% of them disagree, 17% agree, 22% agree, and 17% give a neutral opinion. To identify the specific challenges, the participants were asked an open-ended question to identify the most challenging skill and identify the reason. Quoting from their responses: “I cannot writing good sentence”, “Proposition is very bad for me”, “Writing is very difficult because I can’t see my mistakes” “I always get bad marks in writing”, “I don’t has many vocabulary so I don’t know what to write”, and “I hate writing because spelling difficult.” The participants were fully aware of the difficulties they encounter in writing. This is positively correlated with Orisini-Jones’ (2009) study where he notices from his observation that all his study cases have fuzzy sentence structure with multifarious spelling and grammar mistakes. He also describes their writing as "spoken texts” (p.27).

6. **Conclusion and Future Recommendation**

This study was aimed to investigate the challenges that visually-impaired students at Sultan Qaboos University face when learning the four fundamental language skills (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, and writing). The conclusions drawn from the study do not reflect on all the visually—impaired in Oman as a whole but limited to only the small sample studied of eighteen visually-impaired from one institution. Although the finding showed significant difficulties faced by the visually-impaired in learning English a second language, a more in-depth study of the challenges that are faced by visually-impaired students when acquiring English in relation to multifarious variables such as; academic level, type of vision impairment, and teaching methods, is recommended for future studies. The researcher recommends that teachers should have wide-ranging training before be involved in teaching students with visual impairment. Teachers need be aware of the challenges these students face, technology that can support their learning, and techniques to enrich the teaching environment.

**Acknowledgement**

This paper is under BA course "Research Project".
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