



## Think India (Quarterly Journal)

ISSN: 0971-1260 Vol-22, Special Issue-05

ONE DAY NATIONAL SEMINAR

ON

**DISABILITY, REPRESENTATION AND LITERATURE**

held on 03 October 2019 and Organised by P.G. & Research Department  
of English

S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



### **Practices that can promote Inclusion in English Language Classroom with Blind or Visually Impaired Students**

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#### **Introduction and general research methodology:**

Inclusion in general and at the tertiary education level has a remarkable impact on general classroom teachers as the challenge of meeting the needs of a wide variety of students through inclusive practices seems like a humungous task. It is more difficult in the English language classroom as a wide variety of schemata is operative in the learning processes. The schemata and skills that the students bring to the classroom are heterogeneous and the heterogeneity is spiked inclusive practices, further spiked at the tertiary level as the students have had varied experiences at entry into the English language classroom. The blind or visually impaired (BVI) students are a part of the inclusive system at the tertiary level in India. This paper focuses only on such BVI students for the study. Tertiary level is understood as being synonymous with terminologies such as undergraduate, college, higher education etc.

The teachers at school level dealing with diverse disabilities in the classroom are required to “understand a multitude of exceptionalities, manage a diverse classroom, implement differentiated instructional strategies, and make appropriate accommodations for individual needs.” Not surprisingly, it has been found that the general classroom teacher has a profound impact on the success of inclusive education (Forlin, Loreman, Sharma, & Earle, 2009; Winzer & Mazurek, 2011 as cited in Peebles, 2014.)

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Makarova T.S., Molchanova M.A et al (2016) in their study on BVI students point out that there is a wide range of tactile tools which an English teacher can employ in class to tailor teaching to the BVI students' individual needs. The most available are real objects which are generally used for teaching vocabulary (fruit, vegetables, toys, clothes, pens, pieces of furniture in the classroom, etc). Further, according to them the use of everyday objects ensures that BVI students are building on their own experience. They suggest that an English teacher can also keep a scrap box of empty containers, bits of wire, plastic lids, etc., so they can provide visually impaired children with a 'hands on' explanation of concepts conveyed graphically to sighted learners. They do warn that time issues are to be taken into account when teaching in a BVI classroom. They add that BVI students and their teachers should come to terms with time, as being aware that this category of students needs much more time in anything they do than fully sighted counterparts is crucial. In their study at Moscow they have not mentioned the level of students that were studied. They have catalogued a series of tools that enhance access in a language classroom. But, we need to understand that in reality these practices are best suited and carried out meticulously at the school level, primary level in particular in India. It is also not a common practice to see teachers carry 'hands on' material into the tertiary level classroom and surely not into a language classroom in India. The common belief system seems to be that the tertiary students have outgrown the need for teaching aids in the language classroom.

McBroom, (1997); Reed & Curtis, (2012) advocates that in order for BVI students to succeed in higher education there are specific areas in which they require assistance, including support for reading, accessible materials like Braille books; large print; low vision aids etc. (as cited in Wong 2014). This aspect seemed important for the present study. Attention was consciously paid to look into these key features as a strategy to promote inclusion of BVI students.

Kocyigita N, Artara P.S (2015) point out that it is of utmost importance to be aware of and always keep in mind that (language) learning is not a matter of ex gratia for (visually) impaired students, but a fundamental right to education, which must not be set apart from the human rights in general. For the present study, teacher talk in the teaching learning process happening in the

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classroom was found relevant and offered probable scope to maximize language learning of BVI students through language that is inclusive in its very nature and use.

The aim of this paper is to study the teaching practices that can promote inclusion in the English language classes at tertiary level. The participants were 35 students (30 able bodied and 5 BVI) at the undergraduate level at the University of Hyderabad registered for their integrated masters' programme. All the able bodied students in this study had never studied with a BVI student before, it was their first experience. The researcher, who was also the teacher of this group, has had over eight years of experience of teaching and promoting inclusion in the English language classrooms. The co researcher is a teacher aspirant and a research scholar studying the BVI. Eight English language classes of two hour duration each were considered for this study. The students were seated across the classroom and care was taken to ensure that the BVI were scattered throughout the geography of the classroom seats and not seated as a clique. Focus group discussions (FGD) with the 35 students were based on these classes. In these classes, usage of modals; writing: paragraph, essay, and complaint letter; and oral presentations etc. were taught. The students' perceptions and responses on inclusion in these classes were discussed and data was collected after every class. This data was qualitatively analyzed and thematic bunching was done for further discussion and future research.

### **Discussion and Analysis:**

The FGD revealed that the following practices promoted inclusion of the BVI into the learning processes and it positively impacted and enhanced their learning experiences.

**Position of teacher:** Unlike other courses all the students felt that a strategic change/ movement in the position of the teacher during teaching enhanced inclusion. They felt that since the teacher is not static and 'stuck to the desk or board or podium' and since she moved in the class whenever required while teaching it broke the monotony. Further the BVI students stated that this movement helped them recognize the position of the teacher in the class through the

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loudness of her voice. One BVI student expressed that very often s/h finds it difficult to decide whether or not the teacher is talking to her/him in the other courses and it was difficult to decide whether a response was sought from her/her. The loudness of voice, proximity or distance helped her/ him and 'felt encouraged to respond during the tasks'. Another partially sighted (VI) student 'felt connected to the teacher and thereby the learning processes' when the teacher moved into his/her vision zone. S/he 'felt very happy'. The sighted students too felt 'included' because they often felt that usually only the first benchers 'grabbed the attention of the teachers' and they were happy to see the teacher closer to them during group work.

**Group Presentation:** The teacher used a task based approach to teach group presentation. She had divided the students into 5 groups of 7 students each and through purposive sampling technique she ensured that every group had at least one BVI student. During the group presentation the students had to come up with strategies so that the BVI and sighted students could work together as the presentations were competitive. This helped with cooperation and collaboration among the students. Though they were 'tensed to catch the deadline and manage meeting time for planning and execution' four groups were positive about the experiences that they had during the entire exercise. One student among the four groups expressed 'extreme difficulty' as s/he was a day scholar and found it 'almost impossible' to participate in person, but the group was on call with him/her for important inputs. One group found it very 'challenging' in the beginning as the group members were found to be 'uncooperative' and upon teacher intervention, motivation and counseling they found the experience 'enriching' because the BVI student was found to be a 'fantastic motivator and a tough task master' and they were able to finish the presentation 'only because of her/him'. In all, most of them agreed that the group presentation promoted inclusion because it offered them a rare chance to work closely with a BVI and the experience was 'eye opening, enriching and unique' as the sighted students had never studied with BVIs before. In fact they admitted that they 'had many things to learn from the BVI and this presentation experience had dispelled/ altered/ educated them.

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**Materials :** Materials that were needed during the teaching learning processes were given to the students either during or before the classes (as the class required). Accessibility of these to the BVI was a key issue when dealing with materials. In order to promote inclusion care was taken to present the materials in a wide variety of formats unlike the classrooms that are pen-paper-blackboard-lecture heavy. Paper materials were put in accessible format (for example: Braille and soft copy). The soft copies were given either through the mail or whatsapp based on the individual requirement. For example two BVI students were comfortable with materials in their emails and two requested for the same in a PDF format as they felt that ‘downloading from the mail was difficult’. One partially sighted student requested that a larger font print was accessible to her/him. Before every class, the teacher instructed the students to bring the necessary equipments to class like Braille paper, laptop, earphone, smart phones as per the plan of the lesson. The sighted students were ‘excited’ to see materials printed in Braille for the first time and a few students wanted to learn to read and write and they ‘requested their BVI group member to teach them during their leisure time’. The BVI students were ‘very satisfied and happy that the teacher was showing so much concern and was putting so much of effort to make materials accessible to them, while many teachers just gave them papers.’

**Teacher talk:** The students were advised to use language more sensitively, cautiously and consciously in general and the teacher set her talk as example and permitted the students to question or seek clarification on the choice of expressions/ words as this was a language class. During the classes the teacher pointed out expressions that some students used in ignorance, for example when a sighted student used the expression ‘visually-handicapped’ to refer to their BVI the teacher interjected and corrected the usage. Further the teacher traced the etymology for further elucidation on the ramifications of using such a derogatory term. Such exercises ‘made them more conscious about the choice of words’ while talking even in ‘informal contexts’. Next, whenever presentations were used by the teacher, she made sure to read the text on the slides and reiterated that she was reading from the text. This ‘helped’ the BVI students to ‘distinguish between general talk and reading by the teacher’ because the BVI students were not able to

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‘distinguish’ and were often left ‘confused’ in other courses and they ‘felt excluded’. Such an act by the teacher of using expressions such as “I am reading it out for you”, “The slide reads like this” put things in ‘perspective and cleared out the confusion’ to the BVI. The able bodied students also felt that the teacher was a ‘role model’ for them to ‘carefully use language and think of the BVI and their accessibility issues’. They too felt ‘empowered’ as they were learning to ‘build better social contact and could become better communicators. Similar strategies were used when writing was done on the chalk board.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion a sensitive teacher has a greater role to play to promote inclusion in the class. Inclusion or exclusion depends upon the actual nuances of the teaching practices employed in every class and in every task. Modification in teaching practices can lead to include students with diverse needs in class. Position of teacher, strategic and inclusive grouping of students, materials presented in a varied accessible formats and conscious teacher talk promotes inclusion of BVI into the English language classroom. The results of this study show that the practices may seem simple but it is to be noted that such practices make a lot of difference in inclusion of BVI students in the classroom. Such practices also hone the communication skills of the sighted students and empower them to be better and more sensitive communicators with careful choice of words and expressions

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