



Classroom Participation of Students with Low Vision in Inclusive English Language Class

Dr. Pavan Kumar Yadavalli, Associate Professor
Department of Special Needs and Inclusive Education
Institute of Education and Behavioral Science
Ambo University, P.B.No-19, Ambo, Ethiopia, East Africa.
Email: drpavan09@gmail.com

Mr. Tariku Terfasa Malimo,
Teacher in English & Special Needs Education
Ambo Secondary School, Kebele 01, Ambo
Ethiopia, East Africa
Email: tarfasa2013@gmail.com

Abstract

The aim of this study was to look into classroom participation of students with low vision in inclusive English Language class at Ambo Addis Ketema Primary School. A qualitative research approach along with a case study design was used to investigate the experience of the participants concerning the challenges in the participation of students with low vision in EFL classes at the school. One school principal, two English instructors, five low vision children, five peers without disabilities, the special education teacher, and a supervisor. Generally, a purposive sample method was used to choose 20 individuals. Semi-structured interviews, focused group discussions, and observation were employed as the data collecting tools for the study's purpose to be successful. The data were analyzed thematically in accordance with the research questions.

Based on this, it was found that children with limited eyesight did not receive adequate attention in class and as a result, did not participate as well. This was brought on by a lack of instructional tools and resources, including modified textbooks, magnifying glasses, uncomfortable classroom settings, and untrained instructors.

Key words: Classroom Participation, Inclusive, Low Vision

Introduction

Inclusive education begins with the assumption that all children have a right to be in the same educational space, and it is a continuous process of educational transformation and a clear set of equity indicators (Cobley, 2018; Hehir, et al., 2016; Schuelka & Johnstone, 2012; UNESCO 2017). One of the ways in which inclusive education can be deemed successful is that systems

are in place to monitor the presence, participation, and achievement of all learners within the education system (UNESCO 2017). This is addressed when schools and other learning centers have strategies for encouraging the presence, participation, and achievement of all learners from their local community.

In the recent English language teaching context, one of the greatest challenges for English teachers is to integrate students' participation in classrooms although it is crucial for academic success for all learners in that they can practice all language skills. In line with this, O'Brien (2007) stated that participation is completing the assigned readings, asking questions about anything in the readings or discussion that needs clarification or expansion, offering ideas and responses, listening to the ideas and responses of others, and paying attention and showing respect in the classroom to the teacher and to other students.

As evidence from the literature indicates, students with low vision face challenges to involve into classroom participation and are not given attention by their teachers although they are in inclusive classroom setting. For instance, Kebede (2015) stated that learners who have residual vision and who are attending their lessons in regular schools are always complaining that the teachers are not giving them attention, and even forget their existence in the classroom. He also noted that most of the learners with low vision complain that they cannot read the writing from the chalk board when they sit behind other learners, especially in a dim light.

English Language can possibly enable the students to fully participate in education and successfully accomplish all other subjects they learn. Accordingly, the current study endeavored to fill the gap and explored the challenges faced by learners with low vision and hard-of-hearing in EFL classroom participation and its consequences on their academic performance. On this basis, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How is classroom participation of students with low vision implemented in inclusive English reading lessons?
2. What are the challenges of teaching students with low vision in inclusive EFL class?

The research generally aimed at exploring challenges in classroom participation of students with low vision in inclusive English Language (EFL) classes.

Research methodology

The main purpose of this study was to explore the challenges in classroom participation of students with low vision in inclusive EFL classes at Ambo Addis Ketema Primary School. For the achievement of the study, a case study research design with qualitative research approach was applied in order to obtain optimal information, and the data of analysis were elaborated by words and sentences. The justification for this is that a case study with qualitative approach enables the reader to get a clearer causal picture of the case that the researcher adopted (Widdowson, 2011), and the research was largely based on classroom participation of students with low vision and hard-of-hearing in inclusive English Language class, and it was carried out in a single point in a time.

Description of the Study Area

As indicated in the research title, this study was carried out in Ambo Town, which is found in West Shoa Zone in Oromia Regional State. It has a distance of 114 km from Addis Ababa to the west, and it is the capital of West

Shoa Zone. The total number of population residing in this town is 108,406 out of this total population, 54, 186 and 54, 220 are males and females respectively (CSA, 2007).

Population, Sample and Sampling Techniques

When the study was carried out in Addis ketema primary school, there were five different types of disabilities in the sample school which contain students with low vision, hard-of-hearing, speech and communication problem, intellectual and physical disabilities although the actual clinical identification was not made. Since it was not possible to include all these types of disabilities in the study, the target focus of the research was on the one type of disability, namely: students with low vision in grades 6-8 to stipulate some existed problem they faced to actively participate in English reading and listening lessons respectively.

There were 15 students with low vision in grades 1-8. From the total number of these students, the study employed five students with low vision students in grades 6-8 along with five students without disabilities (close friends) from the same grades, all for focus group discussions (FGDs), one special needs teacher and one supervisor from the school, two English teachers from grades 6-8 and one school principal all for semi-structured interview respectively, in general 20 participants.

The target students were selected from grades 6-8 as they were at senior grade levels in the sample school, and could give salient information for the success of the study. They were observed in English Language classes while they were learning with their none disabled peers in the context of inclusive manner as it was not possible to involve all subject lessons for observation.

The purposive sampling technique, also called judgmental sampling which is a deliberate selection of research informants because of the special personal elements of the informant are presumed to possess. It helps to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience he/she possesses (Nick Ellison, 2010). Hence, for both interview and FGDs, all the participants were selected using purposive sampling technique.

Accordingly, five students (5 SWLV) were selected from grades 6-8 for focus group discussions (FGDs) based on their first semester academic performance (high, medium and low achievers) to gather appropriate data and significant information. Two English teachers were selected from the same grades for semistructured interviews because it was believed that they know more about the target students since they teach them in the regular classes, and because the classroom observation was conducted in English Language class.

One school principal was selected for interview since s/he was responsible in allocating budget, facilitating conducive situation for the learners, and could render reliable data based on school management. Both school special needs teacher and supervisor was selected for semi-structured interviews since they were concerned all about educational support given to the targeted students. Five none disabled peer students (intimate friends) were selected for FGDs to reflect what feelings they and other students have about their peer disabled students. Regarding to overloaded data, the sample size of qualitative research is largely determined by theoretical data saturation especially at a point during data collection stage where new participants do not any longer bring new

data or additional insights to the research questions (Creswell 2014). As a result, it was attempted to avoid redundant information since it doesn't bring new result for the study.

Data Collection Instruments

In social research, a researcher collects data through asking people (interviews), observation, and document study (Flick, 2015). Thus, in the study, qualitative research approach along with a case study was applied through interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and none participatory observation in order to enhance its validity and trust worthiness. On the basis of informants consent, audio recording and note taking were used while collecting the data in the study sessions.

Data analysis and interpretation

Demographic Information of the Participants

The demographic information of the participants is presented in terms of sex, age, educational background/status, work experience and position as in the table below.

School Staff and Principal Participants in Semi-structured Interview

Code	Sex	Age	Educ. Back ground	Work experience	position
T1	F	30-35	Degree in Eng. Lan	10	Teacher
T2	M	35-40	Degree in Eng. Lan	12	Teacher
SNE1	F	30-35	Degree in SNE	10	Assistant Teacher
SVR	M	35-40	Degree in Geography	14	Supervisor
SP	M	35-40	Degree in Physics	15	School Principal

All the participants in the table above took part in the study and interviewed differently. The two English teachers have 10 to 12 work experience, so they are well experienced in the profession and could give reliable information about the target students although they haven't got any training concerning special need education. All other participants know little about special education except the SNIE teacher.

Students with Low Vision (SWLV) Participants in FGDs

Code	Sex	Age	Educ. Status
SWLV1	F	13-15	Grade 8 Student
SWLV2	F	13-16	Grade 8 Student
SWLV3	M	14-16	Grade 7 Student
SWLV4	F	14-16	Grade 7 Student
SWLV5	M	13-15	Grade 6 Student

As stated in the objective of the study, one of the major concerns was about participation of students with low vision in English reading lessons. Therefore, the participants indicated in the table above were SWLV who took part in the FGDs. They were at the age between 13 & 16. Two of them were from grade eight, two were from grade seven and one was from grade six who could render salient information about the issues raised in the FGDs.

Students without Disability Participants in FGDs

Code	Sex	Age	Relationship
SWO1	F	14-17	Friend
SWO2	M	15-17	Friend
SWO3	M	14-16	Friend
SWO4	F	14-16	Friend
SWO5	M	13-15	Friend

Five Non-disabled peer students who were selected for FGDs, all were intimate friends of SWLV.

They were individuals from grade 6-8. Therefore, since they were matured enough and intimate friends of SWLV. As it can be seen in the table, they were expected to give significant information about students with low vision and hard-of-hearing students who were attending the same grades and classrooms with them.

Data Analysis

The data gathered from different respondents through semi-structured interview, focus group discussion and observation were interpreted in respect of the categories dealing with the basic research questions. Although they were presented to different respondents during data collection, they are organized in the way they show the objectives of the study. Therefore, based on the basic research questions and responses from the participants, the researcher has developed four main extensive themes and other subcategories to make the findings clear and comprehensive, and presented the data by merging the collected information from the participants through the three tools. The first two themes have been amalgamated in order to avoid redundancy as their subcategories are the same. In the presentation of the data, „inverted commas“ (“...”) have been used to show the actual words of the interviewees and discussants, but where their speech is long, it has been italicized. The themes are:

1. Classroom participation of students with low vision (SWLV) in Inclusive English reading lessons
 - Classroom atmosphere for SWLV
 - Feelings of SWLV about learning with sighted peers
 - Inaccessibility of adapted learning materials for SWLV
 - Challenges in teaching SWLV in Inclusive English Classroom
 - Suitability of teaching method
 - Availability of resources
 - Managing classroom participation
 - Challenges of learning English Language for SWLV in Inclusive English Classroom
 - Misconception of mainstreaming and its contents
 - Inaccessibility of learning for SWLV in the school
 - These all themes are presented respectively supported by the data collecting instruments below:

Classroom ambience for SWLV

Classroom atmosphere refers to an interesting or exciting mood characteristic of the class regarding to the condition of passive or active participation of SWLV in different activities. Based on this, for the question about if

SWLV have equal participation in all activities done in the classroom with sighted peer students, the two English teachers suggested the following ideas in their semi-structured interview.

T1: said, “To some extent, but not satisfactorily. “He continued: You know! I think this is because most learning materials are given in written form, yet these students have some problems to read the print and written notes from the chalkboard and even from the textbook since it is not adapted and modified. Similarly,

T2: suggested: If the students regularly use magnifying eyeglasses and are given adapted reading materials, they can read and write what they are told to do and participate in different activities equitably in the class, but they sometimes get lost their magnifying eyeglasses and come to school for nothing good. Therefore, I don’t think that they equally participate with their sighted peer students. In addition, the teachers were asked how often they motivate SWLV to participate in reading and writing activities in the class. Based on this, they did not deny that motivation is nothing without the availability of necessary learning materials, and both teachers have almost the same ideas that they face difficulty to get along with SWLV to involve them doing class activities like reading and writing.

For instance, T1 said: Both reading and writing are skills done if only the person can identify the letters/words, but you know, these students cannot clearly see and read the printed materials since they are not adapted the way SWLV are able to read or write. As a result, there is no ground to step on for such motivation.

T2 also shared the same idea and he postulated: Motivation is meaningful if there is a way of doing something. Nonetheless, these students do not have adapted learning materials to learn effectively like their peer sighted students, therefore, motivating them is difficult. For the same question raised for sighted peers in their focus group discussions, they suggested as follows: SWO1: “It is rare to see them participating in class activities.” SWO2: “Somewhat!” The rest discussants agreed with what SWO1 and SWO2 suggested. This was also portrayed by SWLV themselves that their participation in the classroom with different activities is less. Although most of them were afraid to suggest idea about their classroom participation, two of them depicted that they were not as active as their sighted peers, especially, in reading passages, and asking and answering questions. All the above ideas suggested by different respondents seems to be true when they were observed in the classroom while learning English Language. Accordingly, for the items given in the observation checklist, it was noticed that participation of SWLV in reading activities and answering/asking questions were indicated to be poor. The poorness of their participation in different activities in the class may be because of large class size and poor classroom brightness that may not allow the students to use their visual stimulus as it was indicated in the observation checklist. This ensures that the class was inconvenient, and there was no enough bright light for SWLV to read and write from the chalkboard and read 41 printed materials, so they can be easily undermined in their class participation in different activities. With regard to the condition of classroom and active/passive participation of SWHH in the class, for the question about if hard-of-hearing students have equal participation in all activities done in the classroom with non-disabled peers, according to the data obtained from semi-structured interview, the two English teachers reflected their ideas as follows: T1 suggested: As to me, it is almost the same to SWLV, meaning: they do not equally participate with non-disabled peer students. You know, these students are people with minority group, and since

they have hearing problem, they may not get each activity clear which is done by the teacher and even by their hearing peers, and we teachers may not pay attention to them as we all focus on covering the portion, and as a result, I don't think that hard-of-hearing students are active participant as their hearing peers in the class. In addition, T2 raised ideas about the unwillingness of all students including no-disabled that they do not participate in class activities comparing with the challenges hard-of-hearing students face in their education.

Feelings of SWLV about Learning with sighted

In relation to learning with sighted peers, students with low vision shared their past experiences and expressed what their effects were and their worry for future as they reflected in their focus group discussions:

SWLV1: One day, when I could not read the text given in reading lesson, all the students laughed at me, and even the teacher was likely supporting the students, kept silent. As a result, I was really disappointed and thought to dropout. of course once, I was pleased when I got magnifying eyeglass and could read the same to other students, but unfortunately, I lost it somewhere, and I was absent from school for about a month till my parents get me the same eyeglasses.

SWLV2: "Before I got magnifying eyeglasses, I was afraid of reading in the class because I couldn't do it; then, one day the teacher gave me a chance to read, but I refused and she let me get out of the class."

SWLV3: "What my friends suggested is really true." "But as to me, I haven't still got a chance to read because the teacher already identified me that I cannot read fluently like others."

SWLV4: As to me, learning is difficult for students like us (students with disabilities) in mainstream education because students with disabilities are discriminated, for example, not only peer 43 students but also the whole communities including teachers call us as 'disabled'! This happened not only once, but repeatedly. So I always feel bad about such attitude.

SWLV5: "I don't remember my past experience, hmm! But I don't feel confident." "As a result," he added, "I'm not happy to learn." In connection with this, sighted peers were also asked what they feel about the presence of CWDs in their classroom to learn together in their focus group discussions. At first, all of them kept silent for about a minute, but after a while, they tried to express their feelings about being together in class as follows:

SWO1: "Nothing I feel, but I see that they face some difficulties in learning because of inability to perform some activities."

SWO2: "I am afraid that they may not feel comfort as many of us have no good idea about them."

SWO3: "I feel sad when SWLV are bothered about their education."

SWO4: "To tell the truth, I don't feel good about SWLV that they are not confident and incompetent."

SWO5: "Most of the time they remain at the same desk when we are given some activities to do as a group work; this makes me worry about them." What the discussants suggested above actually seemed to be true as in the observation done in all the classes. In fact, the students remain at the same desk when they are told to form a group with other peers, and they do not feel comfort because their peers do not have good idea about them.

Inaccessibility of Adapted Learning Materials

In relation to the above idea, different interviewees and discussants were asked to reflect their ideas in both semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Accordingly, the school principal was interviewed if necessary learning materials are available for SWLV to enable them to equally learn with their sighted peers. He hesitated and said, “I am not sure, you can check from their teacher, and we also have SNIE teacher for full information.” “So! You can just check there.” The researcher continued his question, and asked the school principal about the access to learn for the whole CWDs, especially SWLV in their school. The same to the former question, there was no satisfactory response for the question about the access of learning in the school for CWDs, especially for SWLV. He said, “As it is known, they normally enroll and attend their education. I see that they usually come and enter into the classroom, and I have not observed when they are in difficult situation.” This ensures that the school principle doesn’t take active role in the education of CWDs although there is hope for future that the school principal promised to involve finding some support from NGOs. He said, “In the classroom they may not have enough materials, but now we are trying to get supports from some NGOs to accommodate their needs.” Likewise, for the question what differences they observe among SWLV and their sighted peers in the class while teaching English reading, the two English teachers complained that there are no adapted reading materials for SWLV. They said that they cannot force them to do all 45 activities like reading passages and some writing activities. They depicted that this can easily make differences among SWLV and non-disabled peer students. For instance, T1 said, you know! Most of the time I don’t see that they are wearing their magnifying eyeglasses because I think they feel discomfort, and this time they cannot read and write what they are given to read as classwork. Therefore, reading materials need to be written in large size, and necessary learning aids should be rendered to them. For another question forwarded to the English teachers about the extent to which SWLV manage to read from the textbooks and chalkboard to copy notes, they replied as follows.

T1 said, “They borrow exercise books from their peer sighted learners and copy, but for themselves, they hardly do it.”

T2 also suggested: I sometimes write with large letters on the board, but you know, it is difficult to do this regularly, yet the students do not manage to copy from the chalkboard unless they are wearing their magnifying eyeglasses. The above idea was also confirmed by the students themselves (SWLV) in their focus group discussions that most of them cannot manage to read from the chalkboard and copy into their exercise books.

SWLV1: “I usually start to copy and write, but when I am tired, I stop doing so.”

SWLV2: “My friends lend me and took it home; there, my brother helps me copy.”

SWLV3: “I try my best, but when I do not manage ...”

SWLV4: “The same to my friends”, but to add, this is not only in English Language classes, but also in all subjects we learn.” The data obtained from the observation class also evinced the above idea that the students did not show any initiation or movement to do all the activities stated above. For example, they were sitting idle without doing anything while other sighted peers were copying what was written on the chalkboard. For general question about

the practices of educational inclusion of CWDs in the school and classroom, based on the interview presented for SNIE teacher and supervisor, the SNIE teacher reflected her suggestions as follows.

SNE1: It is difficult to say that there is practice of educational inclusion in the school as well as in the class. In fact, what I don't deny is that these students are available physically as they have the right to enroll like other sighted students. However, I don't dare to say that there is practice of educational inclusion because of the absence of necessary adapted learning materials and equipment that help them learn although the school is likely to be mainstream setting. In addition, as it was observed in grades 7 and 8, the rooms were not bright enough, the classes were with large sizes, necessary learning materials were not enough, and there was less attention towards the SWLV.

Summary of Major Findings

Classroom participation as a whole is crucial for academic success for all learners in all subjects. However, in relation to both students with low vision in inclusive English Language, the teacher participants of the study stated that they have got it difficult to include these learners in an active participation the extent to which it is needed. This is because of different factors like less attention towards the students, poor motivation from the teachers and absence of training for the teachers. Student participants, (low vision) also asserted that they could not participate, especially in English reading and listening lessons since the face different challenges starting from the school situation and other unfair matters. They also suggested that they lack necessary learning materials like magnifying eye glasses for SWLV, and other factors like absence of adapted learning materials, inaccessible classroom situation, unsuitable teaching method, shortage of adapted textbooks and others. These all could result in failure of academic achievement of those students with low vision and hard-of-hearing, and to this end, it can possibly put inclusive education under question to existing the school.

Conclusions

The main purpose of this study was to explore the challenges in classroom participation of students with low vision and hard-of-hearing in inclusive English Language classes. The major conclusions that can be drawn from this study are that students with low vision and hard-of-hearing in inclusive EFL classes have found themselves in difficulties of participating as required. This is because of the challenges they encounter in different direction like that of less motivation they get from their teachers, inadequate learning materials they are provided with, the absence of training for their teachers in relation to inclusiveness, lack of attention towards mainstreaming, and others. These all could lead their participation to be less which may let them have poor academic achievement and even dropout from mainstream school. Nevertheless, although inclusive education is at its infant level in the school and even in the country, it is possible to make effort to access the needed learning materials for students with disabilities to let them fully participate in the classroom and to help them cope up with non-disabled peers in all educational activities. As mainstream, therefore, the school needs to be equipped with all necessary prerequisite that can bring all these students to full participation in all education process. In fact, this may not be an easy task as SWLV faced different challenges because of natural problem they encountered and inaccessible classroom and environment they experienced in their education. As evinced in the findings of the study, the main challenges they

face are numerous. For example, challenges they encounter from the school staff and teachers because of less attention towards them, from their peer students because of their delusion of inclusion, and from the students themselves because of having no access at all in their education. In general, the findings of this study portrayed that although they enrolled in schooling program, both students with low vision and hard-of-hearing were not lucky to get opportunity and access to equally participate in different class activities as their non-disabled peer students, and to be motivated by their teachers and to be welcomed by the school community because of the absence of practical training for the teachers regarding to inclusive education, shortage of adapted learning materials, lack of awareness of school community, and other challenges faced by the children.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions drawn, the researcher would like to recommend the following points to be taken into consideration: It requires teachers to prepare individualized educational plan (IEP) for students with special needs to engage them into active participation in the classroom, and to place them in a real mainstream setting, And teachers should prepare themselves to use different teaching strategies to involve students with special needs in all activities. To do this, it is strongly recommended that unceasing training of teachers should be given priority regarding to mainstream education. The school should ensure the availability of special learning materials and equipment by allocating special budget, and need to equip the library and resource room with necessary materials to provide the service needed for students with special needs. Teachers should get in-service training so that they can be able to recognize and handle learners with disability in their classrooms. Teachers need to pay a particular attention to students with special needs in the classroom, and in the procedures of testing and examination allotting extra time and modifying/adapting the items. Both students with low vision and hard-of-hearing need to be oriented how to use optical devices and hearing aids respectively, and they should be provided with accessible adapted learning materials with normal or if possible, small class size especially where children with disabilities attend their education. Along with this, necessary awareness need to be given for the school community as a whole about special needs students. The school administrators need to collaborate with the Woreda office education in order to augment mainstream education to help children with disabilities participate in all activities in the classroom and within the mainstream setting. Moreover, school administrators need to play a prominent role to collaborate with NGOs to request to get appropriate budget allocation to provide with necessary learning materials and also request ministry of education to review curriculum in order to adapt learning materials for students with low vision to meet their educational need, and assign sign 68 language interpreters for hard-of-hearing students so that they can equally participate with non-disabled peer students in the classroom

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