

Towards the Adoption of Inclusive Strategies for a Non-sighted Undergraduate Student in an EFL Classroom

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Summary

This case-study is an opportunity for English teachers to look into the world of non-sighted learners and understand their learning and affective needs. The study explores how inclusive strategies—technological and socio-affective—can have a positive influence on the learning experience of an English language learner, in this case a non-sighted undergraduate student enrolled in an English as a foreign language programme in a Mexican private university. It draws on a neo-Vygotskian perspective, which highlights the role the socio-affective environment plays in the consolidation of higher psychological functions and problem solving skills. This perspective is valuable for understanding both the language learning process, and the principles of inclusive education.

This study originated because I was faced with a novel problem: a non-sighted learner joined my English class. He had been enrolled in several other English language classes, but he knew he had not developed the language skills required. His previous teachers just had not known what to do. The innovative strategies I developed have the potential to lower the affective barriers that most teachers build when faced with a student who is visually impaired. It does this by offering them some concrete guidelines which have proved successful and which any teacher can use as a starting point.

In the world of special educational needs (SEN), there is an ongoing discussion about whether students with specific needs should be integrated into regular classrooms or taught in groups of peers with a similar profile. In the case of the target student — one of two non-sighted students in a population of ten thousand — providing him with a special-needs group was not feasible. On the other hand, what he had been exposed to was not *“Inclusion”*, either, since sitting in a classroom, listening to his classmates and the teacher discuss images, tables, or information written in the textbook left him unable to participate. This was largely because no one, including the teacher, had any idea of how to include him into the classroom interaction and dynamics. *“No one”* is not an adequate description, because the student himself knew. Part of the problem was that no one had listened to him.

The initial step in this intervention process was to allow the student to describe his abilities and needs, which were attended to through adjustments in the technological area and adaptations within the socio-affective field. The first involved incorporating assistive technology and optimizing the use of JAWS®—Screen Reading Software—inside and outside the classroom. The second included adoption of mediation practices and of collaborative activities which would support the NSL’s strengths.

Data was gathered from different meaningful stakeholders, which included the non-sighted learner (NSL) himself, his former and intervention-group teachers and peers, as well as external observers. Video-recordings of previous and intervention-group lessons, semi-structured interviews with former as well as intervention-group teachers and peers, questionnaires and a journal were the means used to collect the data. Codes were developed to group data according to commonalities of the two main categories: technological and socio-affective strategies.

The research findings show that three adjustments proved to be particularly effective: *providing information in advance* from the technological field and, *mediation and collaborative practices*, and *introducing activities with auditory input*, from the socio-affective field.

- **Providing Information in Advance** allowed the target student to become familiar with learning and performing conditions in the classroom, thus, opening for him the opportunity to participate in ways similar to other students.
- **Mediation and Collaborative Classroom Practices** were perceived as fruitful experiences by most class members and by the target student himself, who also reported experiencing a sense of belonging, which in turn benefited his learning process.
- **Introducing Activities with Auditory Input** avoided the main context of exclusion for the NSL without any negative impact on the other students' language development.

Results show that none of the other students in the group felt their learning opportunities were limited by the adaptations incorporated for the benefit of the NSL. In fact, several students mentioned they had found the diversity in the activities highly enriching and beneficial for their aural skills.

This research also includes suggestions for further adaptations of textbooks and tests to make them more accessible to NSLs. Finally, some conclusions and recommendations are set out in order to inform teachers with non-sighted learners in their EFL classrooms of how they might adapt their practice. This study is an invitation for all to reflect on how people with different abilities have their own ways of coping with life, and specifically, learning foreign languages. It encourages sighted people to close their eyes and take the world in through their other senses.