

# Equalizing Visually Impaired Candidates in ESL Classrooms with Special Reference to Aligarh Muslim University

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**Abstract:** Effective teaching of English as a second language has always been challenging for a language teacher in the ESL classroom. But it becomes a greater challenge when it comes to teach visually impaired students as your regular learners. They are those with whom people usually do not come forward when it comes to formal teaching of a language. There are always some questions in the mind of a teacher, as:

- Is it possible to teach visually impaired and the sighted students together?
- Is it necessary for a language teacher to learn Braille script before teaching?
- What teaching methodology am I going to use with these learners who are visually impaired and studying with the sighted students?
- What teaching strategy should a teacher apply when there is no eye contact with these learners?
- How to minimize the challenges and difficulties in language teaching to these learners?
- Can technology play a positive role in consolidating these students' learning?

This paper answers these above mentioned questions and tries to conclude how a teacher can overcome these challenges and issues allowing the visually impaired students learn a language confidently with sighted ones by developing a sense that they are an important part of the society.

**Keywords:** Visually impaired students, culturally intact students, voice recognition, teaching challenges, methodology, conclusion

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## Introduction

“A blind student is a student first and blind or visually impaired second”. (British Council, 2004) The life of a visually impaired learner is full of challenges and problems especially when s/he decides to go for learning and wishes to be an independent and confident person. It is highly painful to imagine a life without having self eyes. It is not only difficult for a blind learner but also for a teacher to teach such students with equal treatment. A majority of teachers come ahead and show sympathy to these students and ignore their learning errors made in the classroom having the notion that these are blind students and they should be excused if they are making the errors during the learning process. This should ideally be not the approach of a teacher. It should be an inclusive study. These visually impaired students should rather be sympathized at the time of classroom teaching not especially at the time of evaluation. If they are not able to comprehend the knowledge which is being imparted to them, they should be provided with additional efforts and assistance then and there. Here, at Aligarh Muslim University, there are a number of ESL classrooms wherein visually impaired students are enrolled with other sighted students and they have a common class which becomes a greater challenge for a teacher to deal with them together. This evidently proves that it is possible to teach both types of learners under the roof of a same classroom as the blind candidates have substantially been able to succeed for years. But the more important question which drew my attention to write this paper was to investigate how the learning can be made more effective in such an environment where the target learners are not only the blind but also the sighted ones.

## Objective

This paper talks about the challenges and difficulties experienced by visually impaired students in the learning process with special reference to Aligarh Muslim University context where both visually impaired and sighted students learn together after

Secondary School Certificate Examination. It also discusses how a teacher can help these students learn good English as the first step is to equalize them in an ESL classroom. The role of technology is also taken into consideration. Two undergraduate students namely Mohammad Ayob Mir and Nishant Bhardwaj have been interviewed and asked to share their personal experiences about ESL classes they have in Aligarh Muslim University. Finally, this paper tries to come to a conclusion on the basis of the interview and my observation of the ESL inclusive classrooms wherein both blind and sighted students learn together.

## Methodology

It is suggested by Hatlen and Phil, 1996 “need for a core curriculum for students with visual impairments, including those with additional disabilities, is evaluated. The curriculum's components include compensatory or functional academic skills, orientation and mobility, social interaction, independent living skills, recreation and leisure skills, career education, technology, and visual efficiency skills.

The first question on the mind of a teacher who has been given such a classroom is regarding the knowledge of Braille script. S/he first thinks how it would be able to manage if I do not know the Braille script. But this is not a compulsion or a prerequisite for a teacher to learn the Braille script before going into this kind of teaching. We have been living in a technologically advanced era now which makes it easier for a person to translate a text from one form to another. But before that, it is very important for a teacher to understand his learners. If there is a blind student in a classroom, it is the foremost duty of a teacher to interact with that student also like other students and give equal importance to him/her as well. This will help develop a good rapport with that learner and the blind learner will not think himself to be an alien in the classroom environment. This will lead to an inclusive learning experience. At the time of developing rapport with the student, the teacher should be aware of the student's blindness condition if s/he is partially blind or completely blind. It helps a teacher in providing the study material(s) and using the authentic material(s) in the future classes.

Braille introduced in 1829 is a tactile writing system used by the blind and the visually impaired. It is traditionally written with embossed paper. Braille-users can read computer screens and other electronic supports. They can write Braille with the original slate and stylus or type it on a Braille writer, such as a portable Braille note-taker, or on a computer that prints with a Braille embosser. (Panchal et. al, 2014) This is still the most popular technique amongst the blind learners even after massive advancement in science and technology.

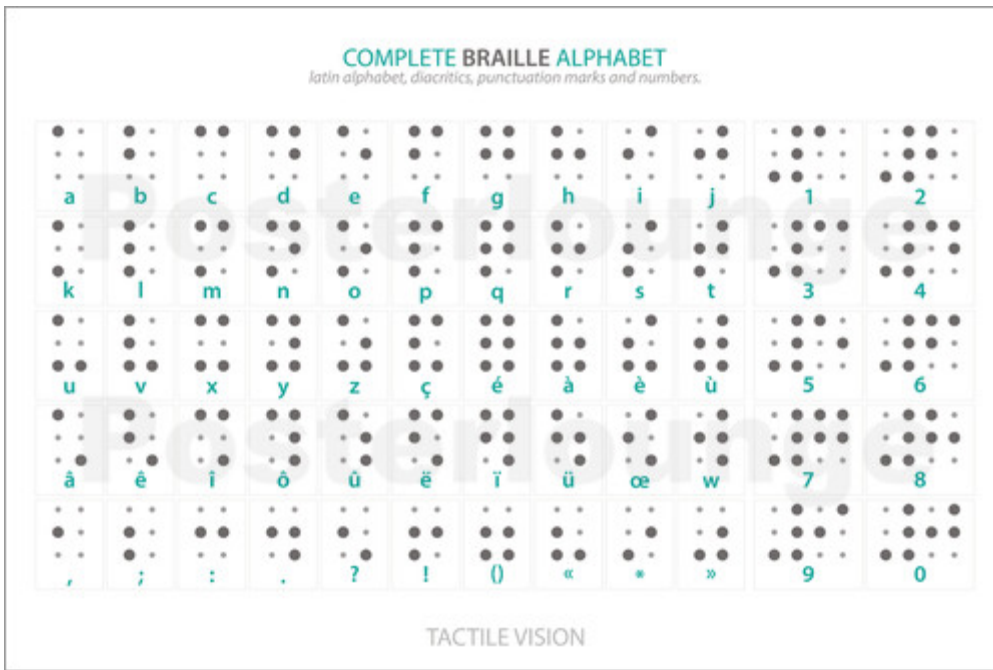


Figure 1: Braille Code

Since a blind student cannot observe your facial expressions, body language and other visuals, it is highly required for a teacher to be loud and clear. A blind student learns through all other senses except for visuals in which listening is the most powerful medium of all. As far as the ESL classroom learning and teaching is concerned, it is essential for a teacher to speak up using the correct and appropriate stress and tone in order to make your teaching effective and productive. Therefore, the loudness as per the class size and clarity plays a vital role in this kind of teaching environment.

In spite of all this, it has been observed many times that the students who are visually impaired have their sixth sense active. They learn the things and grab knowledge more quickly as compared to the students who have good vision. This can be taken up as an advantage by a teacher who is assigned for teaching these students.

According to McLetchie, B. A., & Riggio, M. (1997), "The core of the teacher competencies section is the teacher's ability to build a strong, trusting, personal relationship with the learner." This is crucial for a teacher to build a good rapport with all the learners equally. This will lead to a healthy and effective teaching and learning classroom environment.

"Inclusive education, which is believed to create equity of education to children with disability, is applied in different situations and contexts globally. In this case its implementation is not an easy task; it needs thorough investigation, understanding its aims and principles and taking consistent and appropriate measures to make it successful". (Bishaw, 2013)

This shows that all the learners should be included in the classroom learning and activities with equal importance. The students with visual impairment should be given some additional assistance in order to gear up their learning and equalize it to the level of a normal vision student. So, the education that is imparted should be inclusive.

Inclusive education can also be characterized by taking its inherent features. For example, 'The Guidelines for Inclusion' (UNESCO, 2005), extended the idea that the concept of inclusion could be labeled using the following four key elements:

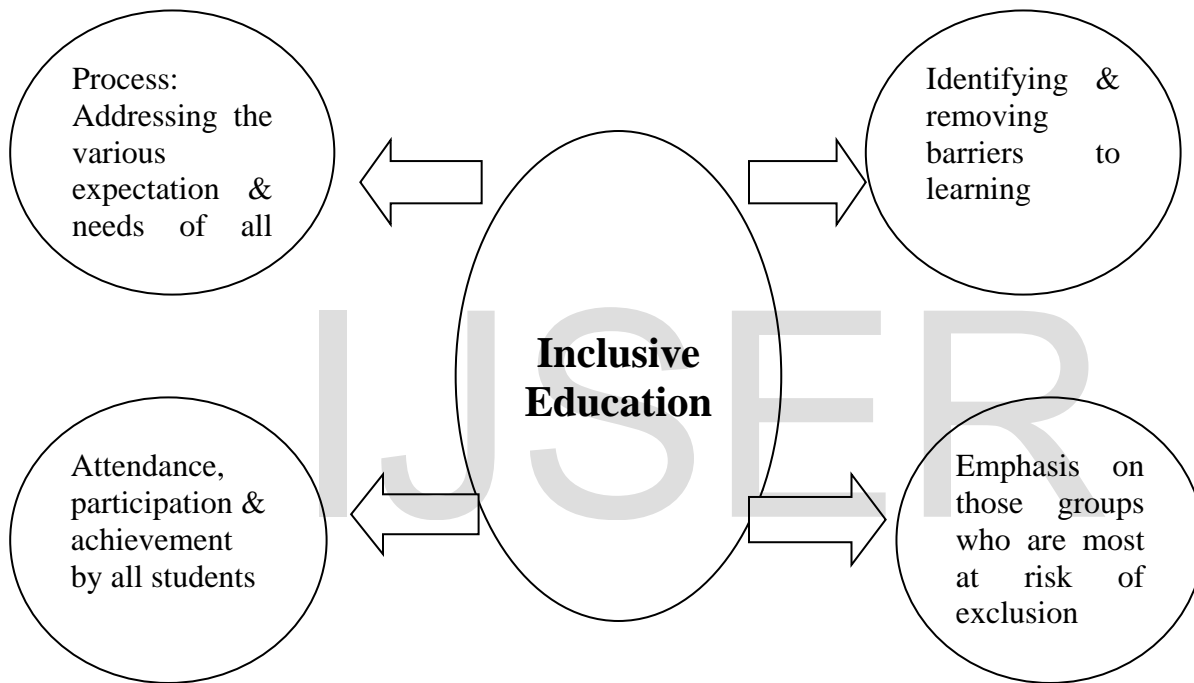


Figure 2: Diagram explaining Inclusive Education

All children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities. There should be a continuum of support and services to match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school. (UNESCO, 1994) cited in Birhanu (2011: 7); Bishaw, K.S. (2013).

#### Blindness Challenges in the Process of Learning

As suggested by Bishaw (2013), there are certain challenges which become a great hindrance in the learning process of visually impaired learners. A teacher who teaches such learners needs to think of these problems and try to reduce these issues to as much extent as possible so that each learner can have effective learning:

- Sight based lessons and teaching material

This is commonly found that in a classroom where both blind and sighted students study together, the problems and challenges of blind students are forgotten by a teacher and s/he continues teaching without taking them into consideration which is completely a wrong approach. There are of course some teachers who are concerned about each of the student who is present in the classroom if the learning is taking place. So, the lessons which are designed for sighted students should be pre-modulated by a teacher in order to make it easier to comprehend by the blind learners as well. After the interview with the blind students, Mohammad Ayob Mir and Nishant Bhardwaj two of the blind students enrolled in BA (Hons.) second year at Aligarh Muslim University, it was found that in their ESL classroom, they are given instructions in a well organized manner but sometimes the sheets which are provided to the students for classroom activities are not so useful for them as they cannot read it out by themselves and other students remain engaged doing the activities. When they were asked what technique they would suggest to overcome this issue, they replied that it would be better if the concerned teacher get that particular activity sheet translated in the Braille script before taking up the class.

- High level of the use of audio-visual tools in the classroom

If a teacher uses some technology in a language classroom, it is sometimes not understandable to the blind candidates. To avoid this issue, a teacher should reconfirm them if they can get it. If not, it is always better to repeat that audio/video clip. These learners are completely dependent on the audio part not the shown video.

- The adaptation of existing textbooks: lack of reading material in a digital format.

All the academic books which are prescribed in syllabus are not available in the Braille section of the library. This must be brought into notice of the university/academic institution.

- Lack of assistive technology

There is undoubtedly a lack of technology that may come into use for the purpose of learning. These Blind learners can enhance their skills if they are provided with the sufficient technological devices. The Blind learners in Aligarh Muslim University have this issue and this should be avoided at the earliest.

- The teaching approach – lack of qualified teaching staff

The teaching approach applied by a facilitator should be self sufficient for effective teaching. Here at Aligarh Muslim University, we have undoubtedly some good and competent language teachers. But the university requires many more trained, skilful and qualified teachers who can handle such inclusive classrooms.

- Poor or no braille skills may influence negatively the process of learning

It is a huge problem if a blind learner does not know the Braille script. Because that is the primary script that a blind learner must know. With the help of Braille script, learning becomes easier. The learners who know Braille script have more chances of better learning as compared to those who do not know it.



*Figure 3: A Blind Learner in Maulana Azad Library (Braille Section), Aligarh Muslim University alongwith the Braille scripted books in the background. This boy lost his sight when he was in class eighth.*

- Lack of “Good computer skills including the knowledge on how to use the available assistive technology”  
It is highly recommended to the teachers to have good command of assistive technology besides subject knowledge else it becomes very difficult dealing with the students with no vision. To be an effective teacher, knowledge of the assistive technology is a prerequisite now. According to Bishaw, 2013, it can improve the quality of the lesson and strengthen the learning procedure. This can also enhance the communication between the blind student and the teacher who has no braille knowledge since the student may type and read in braille but the teacher can read on the computer screen and write on the QWERTY keyboard.

### Minimizing the Challenges of Visually Disadvantaged Learners with Learning Technology

On the basis of an interview followed by a discussion with two blind students studying in BA (Hons.) third semester at Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, and after observing some of the recent researches like *Teaching Foreign Languages to Students who are Blind, 2015* some of the key points that may help blind learners effective learning and it will also help a teacher who is assigned to teach students in an inclusive class.

“Many of the barriers that students who are blind face..., can be over passed by using technology, particularly since electrical devices now are part of everyday life. One of the most important areas in which technology can offer helpful solutions, is that of access to information and more specifically access to teaching/reading material”. (Bishaw, 2013) Moreover, students take much more interest in classroom learning and activities if technology is included as teaching aid. Inclusion of technology in a classroom setting helps a teacher in explaining the subject matter more properly.

### Use of Computer with a Screen Reader

A computer can be used as an authentic material in a language classroom but if it is an inclusive class, it becomes more difficult for a teacher to manage. But there is software called, Google Talkback. According to Wikipedia, Google Talkback is, “an accessibility service for Android that helped blind and visually impaired users to interact with their devices. It made use of spoken words, vibration and other audible feedback to allow the user to know what is happening on the screen allowing the user to better interact with their device. The service was pre-installed on many Android devices. In 2017, it was replaced by Google with Android Accessibility Suite 6.2.”

Android Accessibility Suite is a collection of accessibility services that enable people to use an Android device eyes-free or with the use of a switch device. Android Accessibility Suite includes the following services:

- The TalkBack screen reader adds spoken, audible, and vibration feedback to your device.
- Switch Access lets you control your device with a switch.
- Select to Speak lets you select something on your screen and hear it read or described aloud.

### Use of Reading Machines

This is something that is usually popular amongst adults, but a student learning a foreign language may benefit from its use, especially if s/he has to read a large portion of text or a book. A Reading Machine may come in different models and designs but the result is the same: a text is either scanned or captured by a camera and then automatically recognized into a text form by the machine and read out loud. It at times found that all the books that a blind learners need for the purpose of study are neither available in Braille script nor on internet with which a learner can listen to it. In such a condition, this reading machine is very helpful.



*Figure 4: Reading Machine that reads out the text in print*

### Use of Digital Accessible Information SYstem (DAISY) Books and Players

DAISY (Digital Accessible Information SYstem) is a technical standard for digital audiobooks, periodicals and computerized text. DAISY is designed to be a complete audio substitute for print material and is specifically designed for use by people with "print disabilities", including blindness, impaired vision, and dyslexia. Based on the MP3 and XML formats, the DAISY format has advanced features in addition to those of a traditional audio book. Users can search, place bookmarks, precisely navigate line by line, and regulate the speaking speed without distortion. DAISY also provides aurally accessible tables, references and additional information.<sup>[1]</sup> As a result, DAISY allows visually impaired listeners to navigate something as complex as an encyclopedia or textbook, otherwise impossible using conventional audio recordings. (Wikipedia) The Aligarh Muslim University has been giving the facility of DAISY to its visually challenged learners for more than a decade.



*Figure 5: A DAISY player that is used for navigating visually impaired learners for accessing something as complex as an encyclopedia or textbook*

### Online Dictionaries

Nowadays the online dictionaries have an audio option with it with the help of which a learner can not only learn the pronunciation of a word that is unknown to her/him but s/he can get other details related to it like its meaning, origin, sentential use et cetera.

### Using a Digital Recorder to Take Notes

There are many types of digital tape recorder using various (non compatible) formats. They all use the principles of digitizing sound covered in the digital audio easy, and they all face the same challenge: how to get a high enough frequency response to record the massive amounts of data audio needs. There are two fundamental approaches- many tracks, or a very high tape speed. They are though expensive but these all equipment can be arranged by the university or the academic institution.

### Using Accessible Digital Games to Enhance Vocabulary and Grammar Skills



The definitions of a game in four internet dictionaries (OED, MOT Collins, MacMillan, Merriam-Webster) clearly form a picture of a leisure time activity with an entertaining, competitive and rule-governed nature. (Erkkilä, 2017) Digital games can now be easily accessible on mobile phones or computers. This can be more helpful for a learner with visual impairment. These digital games have an audio option in it which enables them to play it.

## Conclusion

On the basis of the interview of the blind learners, it has been found that these learners are now more aware of the importance of English language and more inclined towards educating themselves. They were interviewed in English language only and they tried their best and responded in English language. This shows they are consolidating themselves. Earlier, a few visually impaired students used to come for higher studies but now their perspective is changing and they are valuing English language learning and attaining education like a normal sighted student. It is an immense pleasure to find out the steps taken up by the country's government that it is promoting inclusive learning and facilitating it. When these students were asked if they wish to have separate language classrooms for them or they like to sit with other sighted students in one class. The answer was amazing. They said they get exposure to learn better if they sit with sighted students. All the smart strategies applied by a teacher like more focus on oral communication, clapping, correct and appropriate use of stress and tone as per the requirement can make it an effective classroom. There is the accessibility of internet via university wifi connection but if innovative gadgets are provided in the Braille section of the library, it will be of more ease in the process of learning. The blind students will be able to do self learning after the classes. There should be a facility of more skilled and trained persons who can assist these blind candidates. If all these components are taken into consideration, nobody can stop the effective learning of these visually challenged learners and hence they will be confident and lessen their dependency on others. It will also enable them to be placed at good organizations.

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