

Poor English Skills among Visually Impaired Students, Overall Growth Retardation

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Abstract

The present paper identifies 'poor English skills' among visually impaired students as one of the most drastic challenges at the higher education level. It attempts to cogitate on the factors which pave the way for this stark condition. To analyze the causes for this stipulation, two relevant case studies are furnished. An appraisal of these cases facilitates in understanding the downside of the existing systems in schools. The magnitude of the problem advocates intervention at the basic and early levels.

Keywords: English, Skills, Students, Visually Impaired, Schools, Growth

In India, English has transcended from the status of the language. It has acquired the position of a skill. It has developed into an inevitable job skill in the Indian job market. Whatever the job be, English skill is a prerequisite. Further, the ubiquitous nature of Multinational Corporate in India has increased the demand for good English skills among the members of the faculty. May it be technical jobs or nontechnical jobs, all call for English as a mandatory ability.

Another important actuality which cannot be overlooked is that English is the medium of instructions at higher education level in India. Therefore, students who hail from non-English medium schools confront challenges at the college phase. However, the students get by due to the basic knowledge of English reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Also, English is taught as an auxiliary subject. This helps the students in enhancing their Basic English skills and trains themselves for the next phase, which is a career.

Education for persons with disabilities in India is a lateral dimension. Despite the Government schemes and resources allocated for educating the person with special needs, there are deficiencies on account of lack of optimal utilization and participation. There are efforts put and goals set. Nonetheless, reality and idealism do not correspond. The theories need to be revised to change reality. There are many special schools for the visually impaired alongside the schools offering integrated and inclusive scheme of education. However, the higher education system at college and in the universities is regular, and such students get admitted to the main stream.

By and large, there is no provision for special colleges for persons with visual impairment. In a way, it is an opportunity for the students to socially and academically integrate and get accepted in the main stream community.

Students at college and university level show signs of poor English skills, which affect their academic performance on the whole. They perform poorly in the tests as they are unable to spell words correctly during their dictation to the scribe. They are not able to identify the right punctuation in the right place. They pronounce certain words inaccurately. They cannot pronounce as they have no proper reading skills—the struggle to speak as they lack confidence on the whole.

To endorse the above-furnished statements, two case studies are presented as follows.

Case Study 1

Akeela (name changed) is a student with visual impairment, doing B.A. English in one of the renowned Universities in Coimbatore. She has studied in one of the English medium schools and passed with distinction. However, she is struggling hard to pass her exams in her undergraduate phase. She is working hard, yet is unable to meet the standard. She uses Braille and audio recorded materials for her preparation. She admits that she is very poor in spellings as she had very scarce Braille reading material in her school. She listened to her lessons and had reproduced them in the form of dictation to the scribe.

Case Study 2

Aneesh (name changed) is a visually impaired young man. He is a postgraduate in Economics. It is three years since his postgraduation. However, he is still looking for a job. He aspires to work in the corporate sector and feels that teaching or banking is a stereotype persons with visual impairment. He is unable to procure his dream job as he has poor English skills. He says that he had no reading practice in his school life, and he has very poor vocabulary and stammers while speaking in English.

Lack of reading practice at school level affects the speaking skill of individuals. Both Akeela and Aneesh regret that they did not have Braille reading

material to practice reading. Although listening is a good opportunity to learn words and pronunciation, reading out aloud is imperative to overcome speaking inhibitions. Unable to read adequately also affects spellings. Akeela acknowledges her poor spellings, which result in academic disappointments.

English as a skill should be imbibed early in life. Any language is well learned in the early stage of one's life. English is a very rich language with a million words in its vocabulary. It is difficult to master even the basic lexical system at the level of higher education where the student is expected to major in a particular discipline. Akeela studying for an English major, is unable to overcome her deficiencies as she has to concentrate at an advanced level of English. Both Aneesh and Akeela have been deprived of English reading and writing. Later, despite their hard work and meritorious aptitude, they have fallen behind. They are not able to fulfill their pursuits.

The most important finding is that students with visual impairment require early intervention in learning English. Reading materials in Braille is to be made available for all students individually. There are schools that run resource centers to help students with visual impairment. However, they get only limited resources, and a single set of books is to be shared among all students in that school. It encumbers the study routine, and eventually, the resource center uses the Braille material for mere exhibition and inspections. In an article on "Children's Braille Book-of-the-month Club," Diane L. Croft is of the view that:

Sighted children are exposed to enough print so that some of them are reading by the age of three or four. Blind children who start school rarely have had the kind of exposure to braille that sighted children have had to print. A late start is a disadvantage. Studies show that blind students are several reading grades behind their sighted peers. Gaining an appreciation for braille reading can begin at home in a comfortable setting, where the braille characters come alive in a story (p. 71)

Students with visual impairment lack in writing as they are not made to write composition exercises. As a result, they are left ignorant of spellings,

punctuations, paragraph construction, and others.

A special module for teaching English at a basic level has to be used by all schools. Special attention is required, as Shelley Kinash and Ania Paszuk (2007) state "... education must be individualized; each student brings a unique matrix of gifts, capacities, and challenges".

Children with blindness are treated equally but not taught equally. This inequality is due to a need for special strategies to teach students with visual impairment. It is challenging and requires special exertion. However, students with visual impairment deserve fairness in education. Marion A. Hersh and Michael A. Johnson (2008) observe that "... it should be recognized that there is not a particular norm or way of being human that is better than others, but that the full range of diversity is equally valid and valuable". (p. 3)

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