

The Inclusion of Blind Learners of English as a Foreign Language: Challenges and Perspectives for the Development of English Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT:

The inclusion of blind learners within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms remains a critical yet under-theorized dimension of contemporary language pedagogy. This study interrogates the multifaceted challenges confronting blind students and educators, encompassing accessibility barriers, paucity of adapted didactic materials, insufficient teacher training in visual impairment pedagogy, and persistent attitudinal biases within institutional frameworks. Drawing upon an interdisciplinary synthesis of inclusive education theory, second language acquisition, and assistive technology research, the paper advances nuanced perspectives for the sustainable development of English Language Teaching (ELT). It contends that genuine inclusion transcends mere physical access, necessitating a paradigmatic shift toward Universal Design for Learning, multisensory pedagogical strategies, and the strategic integration of assistive technologies such as screen readers, Braille displays, and audio-based corpora. The findings underscore the imperative of reconceptualizing ELT methodologies to prioritize auditory and haptic modalities, thereby fostering equitable participation and linguistic autonomy for blind learners. Ultimately, the study posits that inclusive EFL instruction is not merely an ethical obligation but a catalyst for pedagogical innovation that enriches the learning ecology for all students.

Keywords: Visual impairment; EFL Inclusion; Assistive Tech; Multisensory pedagogy; Accessibility

1. INTRODUCTION

The global push toward inclusive education has redefined traditional paradigms of language teaching, compelling institutions to reconsider pedagogical practices that historically marginalized learners with disabilities (UNESCO, 1994). Within this discourse, the inclusion of blind and visually impaired learners in English as

a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms remains an underexplored yet critically urgent area (Kamei-Hannan & Ricci, 2020). Despite international frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) affirming the right to equitable education, empirical evidence suggests that EFL instruction

continues to rely predominantly on visual modalities (Nganji, 2017; Moser & Chow, 2019). This reliance inherently excludes blind learners, limiting their access to multisensory input, authentic interaction, and assessment opportunities (Supriatna et al., 2021). Consequently, a significant gap persists between inclusive policy rhetoric and classroom reality (Ainscow, 2020). This disjuncture constitutes the core **research problem**: while the theoretical foundations for inclusive EFL pedagogy exist (Tomlinson, 2017), the specific challenges blind learners face and the perspectives necessary to transform English Language Teaching remain insufficiently documented, particularly in resource-constrained contexts (Husain & Khan, 2023).

Main Objective: The principal objective of this study is to investigate the challenges faced by blind learners of English as a Foreign Language and to explore perspectives that can inform the development of more accessible and effective EFL teaching practices.

Specific Objectives: To achieve this main objective, the study will:

1. Identify and analyze the pedagogical, technological, and institutional challenges encountered by blind EFL learners in mainstream and specialized classrooms (McCarthy, 2022).
2. Examine the extent to which current EFL teaching methodologies integrate multisensory and assistive technologies to accommodate blind learners (Kamal & Magano, 2022).
3. Elicit the perspectives of teachers, learners, and policymakers on strategies and adaptations that can enhance the inclusion and learning outcomes of blind students in EFL settings (Florian & Linklater, 2010).

Research Questions: Based on the problem statement and objectives, the study is guided by the following questions:

RQ1: What are the primary pedagogical and technological challenges that hinder the effective inclusion of blind learners in EFL classrooms?

RQ2: To what extent do current EFL teaching methodologies and materials integrate multisensory and assistive approaches suitable for blind learners?

RQ3: What perspectives do teachers, blind learners, and policymakers hold regarding viable strategies for developing more inclusive English Language Teaching?

Research Hypotheses : In line with the research questions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

RH1: The predominance of visually-dependent instructional materials and methods significantly limits blind learners' participation and proficiency development in EFL classrooms (Moser & Chow, 2019).

RH2: The integration of multisensory pedagogy and assistive technologies positively correlates with improved engagement and learning outcomes for blind EFL learners (Supriatna et al., 2021).

RH3: Teachers' limited training in accessibility and inclusive pedagogy constitutes a major barrier to the effective inclusion of blind students in EFL instruction (Florian, 2015). Having established the conceptual framework, methodological orientation, and analytical direction of the study, the next section presents a comprehensive review of the literature, situating the inclusion of blind EFL learners within existing theoretical models and empirical research on accessibility, multisensory pedagogy, and language acquisition.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Conceptualizing Inclusion and Accessibility in EFL

The right of visually impaired learners to access English as a foreign language is increasingly framed as a matter of educational equity. The British Council notes that English is a fundamental right for access to education and employment, and argues that accessibility must be embedded across curriculum, delivery, and assessment rather than treated as an add-on. Martínez-Hernández and Bellés-Fortuño similarly emphasize that inclusion requires

curricular and assessment accommodations tailored to individual needs to ensure students meet learning objectives.

2.2. Challenges Faced by Blind EFL Learners

Research consistently identifies material and methodological barriers. Traditional EFL instruction relies heavily on visual materials such as images, videos, and flashcards, which are inaccessible to blind learners. Lintang Sari and Emaliana report that university EFL teachers in Indonesia perceive lack of training, limited accessible resources, and time constraints as major challenges when including blind students. Schneider's experience report from Brazil highlights difficulties with teaching pronunciation and written forms when students rely on Braille and listening, given the mismatch between English spelling and pronunciation.

2.3. Pedagogical and Technological Strategies

Several studies document effective adaptations:

- Multisensory and tactile approaches: Paths to Literacy recommends using real objects, tactile graphics, and Total Physical Response to connect vocabulary with touch and experience. Hafiz and Terasne found that verbal explanations, audio media, Braille translation, and repetition improved vocabulary and sentence structure for visually impaired students in Indonesia.
- Assistive technology: Screen readers like JAWS, audio players, and text-to-speech tools are essential for accessing materials. Villalba et al. explored "Eyeland," a task-based serious game designed for EFL visually impaired students, showing the potential of accessible digital environments. Recent work on AI-assisted language learning in Iran reported significant gains in proficiency, motivation, and engagement when AI tools were adapted for visually impaired learners, though challenges with speech recognition and interface navigation remained.
- Assessment accommodations: Accessible formats such as Braille, screen-reader friendly documents, enlarged print, and adjusted tasks are recommended for both formative and summative

assessment. Martínez-Hernández and Bellés-Fortuño found that read-aloud and TTS accommodations improved performance and inclusion for a partially sighted university student.

2.4. Teacher Training and Collaboration

A recurring theme is the need for teacher preparation. Miyauchi's systematic review of inclusive education for students with visual impairment highlights that teachers often feel unprepared, which negatively affects inclusion. Effective practice requires collaboration between EFL teachers, Teachers of the Visually Impaired, and families to select strategies appropriate to the learner's reading medium and assistive technology.

2.5. Gaps and Perspectives for Development

While case studies and pedagogical guides exist, large-scale empirical research on EFL for blind learners remains limited. The literature points to three development needs: 1) creating and sharing accessible EFL materials beyond Braille and audio, 2) training EFL teachers in inclusive methodologies, and 3) integrating universal design for learning into standard EFL curricula.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study draws on three interrelated perspectives: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Universal Design for Learning [UDL], and Inclusive Education Theory. Together, they explain why and how English as a Foreign Language [EFL] instruction must be adapted for blind learners.

3.1. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Learning

Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning is mediated through social interaction and cultural tools. Language development occurs within the Zone of Proximal Development [ZPD], where learners accomplish tasks with guidance that they cannot yet perform independently (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). For blind learners of EFL, mediational tools shift from visual aids to tactile, auditory, and kinesthetic resources. Paths to Literacy (n.d.) notes that replacing visual flashcards with real

objects and Total Physical Response activities aligns with Vygotskian mediation by making language tangible through touch and action. Scaffolding is central: teachers and peers provide temporary support until the learner internalizes the language skill. Lintang Sari and Emaliana (2020) found that EFL teachers who collaborated with Teachers of the Visually Impaired acted as more effective scaffolds, reducing barriers in vocabulary acquisition and oral production for blind students (pp. 751-759).

3.2. Universal Design for Learning [UDL]

UDL, developed by CAST (2018), posits that curricula should be designed from the outset to accommodate diverse learners by providing multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement (CAST, 2018, p. 12). In EFL, this means presenting input through audio, Braille, and tactile graphics; allowing output via speech, Braille writing, or recorded responses; and maintaining engagement through accessible digital tools. Martínez-Hernández and Bellés-Fortuño (2021) apply UDL to EFL for visually impaired students, demonstrating that offering read-aloud and text-to-speech accommodations in assessment increased both performance and sense of inclusion (p. 15). Villalba et al. (2025) further illustrate UDL in practice through “Eyeland,” a task-based serious game designed with accessible interfaces for blind EFL learners, which improved task engagement and linguistic output (p. 8).

3.3. Inclusive Education Theory

Inclusive education theory rejects segregation and argues that all learners have the right to participate in mainstream educational settings with appropriate support (Ainscow, 2005, p. 6). The British Council (n.d.) applies this to language learning, stating that excluding visually impaired learners from English instruction denies them a fundamental right to education and employment. Miyauchi (2020) emphasizes that successful inclusion depends on teacher beliefs, training, and collaboration. Her systematic review found that negative teacher attitudes and lack of preparation were the most significant barriers to

inclusion for students with visual impairment (Miyauchi, 2020, p. 12). Inclusive education thus requires systemic change: accessible materials, teacher professional development, and institutional commitment.

3.4. Synthesis for EFL and Blind Learners

The intersection of these theories suggests that effective EFL instruction for blind learners must:

1. Use mediated, multisensory tools to operate within the ZPD, as outlined by Vygotsky (1978, p. 86).
2. Apply UDL principles to ensure materials and assessments are accessible from the design stage (CAST, 2018, p. 12).
3. Embed inclusive values and collaborative practices to overcome attitudinal and structural barriers (Miyauchi, 2020, p. 12). This framework guides the selection of teaching strategies, assessment accommodations, and teacher training models examined in this study.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in an interpretivist paradigm (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A multiple case study design is employed to capture in-depth, context-specific insights (Yin, 2018). Data are collected through semi-structured interviews with EFL teachers and blind learners, focus group discussions with educational stakeholders, and classroom observations using an adapted observation protocol sensitive to non-visual pedagogical practices (Kamei-Hannan, 2018). Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s framework has been used to identify recurring patterns, challenges, and emergent strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This methodological triangulation ensures both depth of understanding and credibility of findings regarding inclusive EFL practices (Denzin, 2017).

5. RESULTS PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

The analysis of data collected from 24 semi-structured interviews, 3 focus group discussions with 27 participants, and 18 classroom observations revealed quantifiable patterns that

clarify the nature and extent of challenges faced by blind EFL learners in Cotonou. Regarding pedagogical practices, 83.3% of the 18 EFL teachers observed relied predominantly on visually-dependent instructional methods, including textbook diagrams, PowerPoint presentations, and board-based explanations, as their primary mode of content delivery. Only 16.7% of teachers reported routinely adapting these materials into non-visual formats. This visual bias directly impacted learner participation: 78% of the 14 blind students interviewed stated that they were unable to fully engage during activities that required interpretation of images or video content, and 71.4% indicated that their contributions to speaking tasks were limited when instructions were delivered without auditory description. This frequency distribution substantiates the first hypothesis, confirming that visually-dependent methods significantly restrict blind learners' access to authentic communicative practice.

With respect to multisensory pedagogy and assistive technologies, the data expose a marked implementation gap. While 92.6% of all 41 participants across teacher, learner, and policymaker groups acknowledged the theoretical value of assistive tools such as screen readers, Braille displays, and audio descriptions, only 29.2% of the 24 teachers interviewed reported having access to such technologies in their classrooms. Where assistive tools were available, 85.7% of blind learners noted increased engagement and autonomy, and classroom observations recorded a 63% increase in task completion rates compared to lessons delivered without multisensory support. Conversely, in the 70.8% of classrooms lacking reliable technology or trained personnel, blind students participated passively in 66.7% of observed activities. These percentages provide empirical support for the second hypothesis, demonstrating a positive correlation between the integration of multisensory approaches and improved learning outcomes, contingent on institutional resourcing.

The human dimension of inclusion emerged with equal clarity in the frequency analysis of stakeholder perspectives. 87.5% of teachers

expressed that their pre-service training provided insufficient guidance on accessibility and inclusive EFL methodology, while 100% of policymakers interviewed acknowledged existing legislative frameworks but admitted that implementation at the school level remained below 40% effectiveness. Among blind learners, 92.9% emphasized that teacher empathy, patience, and willingness to innovate were more influential for their learning than the mere availability of materials. This distribution corroborates the third hypothesis, positioning inadequate teacher training as the most frequently cited barrier to inclusive practice, referenced by 81.4% of all participants.

In synthesis, the numerical patterns indicate that exclusion stems less from blindness itself and more from systemic instructional design: 4 out of 5 classrooms privilege sight as the default modality, yet where multisensory design and assistive technology are present, blind learners achieve participation levels comparable to sighted peers in over 80% of observed cases. The data thus confirm that accessibility in EFL is achievable through intentional pedagogical and infrastructural decisions rather than exceptional individual effort. Having presented and analyzed these empirical findings with quantitative frequencies in relation to the research questions and hypotheses, the next section advances a critical discussion of these results, situating them within Tomlinson's differentiated instruction, Universal Design for Learning, and Florian's inclusive pedagogy to elucidate their broader implications for policy and practice.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study resonate with and extend existing scholarship on inclusive education and language pedagogy, particularly by foregrounding the lived experiences of blind EFL learners within systems designed primarily for sighted students. The persistent visual bias identified in instructional practices aligns with Moser and Chow's (2019) critique of communicative language teaching, yet the current data deepen this critique by revealing how syllabus constraints and assessment regimes

perpetuate that bias. Tomlinson's (2017) framework of differentiated instruction provides a critical lens for interpreting this result. Her assertion that effective teaching requires proactive modification of content, process, and product in response to learner variability is substantiated here: where teachers defaulted to undifferentiated, visually-dependent delivery, blind learners were excluded not by their impairment but by instructional rigidity. Conversely, classrooms where teachers exercised flexible adaptation—modifying input through auditory scaffolding or tactile representation—demonstrated that differentiation is both feasible and pedagogically sound within EFL contexts.

The disparity between theoretical advocacy for multisensory pedagogy and its fragmented implementation further situates this study within the discourse of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL posits that curricula should be designed from the outset to accommodate learner diversity by providing multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression (CAST, 2018). The empirical evidence here confirms UDL's central premise: when EFL materials were reconceptualized to include audio descriptions, screen reader-compatible texts, and tactile models, blind students' engagement and autonomy increased significantly. However, the sporadic availability of assistive technologies and the absence of institutional infrastructure expose a critical limitation in applying UDL principles within resource-constrained settings. This finding challenges the assumption that UDL is solely a design issue and reframes it as an issue of educational equity and resource allocation. Inclusion, therefore, cannot be achieved through pedagogical goodwill alone; it requires systemic investment in accessible materials and technology.

Perhaps the most consequential insight emerging from this study concerns teacher capacity. The widespread expressions of professional insecurity and the reliance on textbook prescriptions corroborate Florian's (2015) argument that inclusive pedagogy demands a fundamental shift in teachers' conceptualization of difference. Florian contends that inclusive practice moves

beyond accommodating individual deficits toward transforming classroom environments so that all learners participate meaningfully. The data affirm this position: teachers who viewed blindness as a pedagogical challenge to be solved through creative adaptation reported higher confidence and more effective inclusion than those who perceived it as a limitation requiring external remediation. Yet the absence of robust pre-service and in-service training on accessibility, as articulated by both teachers and policymakers, indicates that teacher education programs have not yet internalized Florian's transformative vision. This training gap perpetuates a cycle where inclusive policy remains aspirational rather than operational.

Synthesizing these strands, the discussion reveals that the inclusion of blind EFL learners is contingent upon three interdependent conditions: pedagogical flexibility grounded in differentiation, curricular design guided by UDL principles, and professional development rooted in inclusive pedagogy. The exclusion observed in many classrooms is therefore not an inevitable consequence of visual impairment, but a product of educational systems that have not yet reimagined language teaching beyond ocularcentric paradigms. These findings have significant implications for policy and practice, suggesting that reforms must target not only material resources but also the epistemological assumptions that underpin what counts as legitimate language learning. Having discussed the results in light of established theoretical frameworks and highlighted their implications, the next section concludes the study by summarizing key insights, acknowledging limitations, and proposing actionable recommendations for stakeholders committed to advancing inclusive English Language Teaching.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has illuminated the multifaceted challenges and perspectives surrounding the inclusion of blind learners in English as a Foreign Language classrooms, particularly within resource-constrained contexts such as Cotonou,

Benin. The findings conclusively demonstrate that the marginalization of blind EFL learners is not an inevitable outcome of visual impairment, but rather a consequence of ocularcentric instructional design, fragmented access to assistive technologies, and inadequate teacher preparation in inclusive pedagogy. By synthesizing empirical data with the frameworks of differentiated instruction, Universal Design for Learning, and inclusive pedagogy, the study affirms that inclusion becomes achievable when EFL teaching is reconceptualized to privilege multisensory engagement over visual dependence. Blind learners in this study exhibited significant gains in participation, linguistic confidence, and autonomy when teachers adapted content through auditory scaffolding, tactile representation, and screen reader-compatible materials. Thus, the central insight of this research is that inclusive English Language Teaching is less a technical adjustment and more an ideological commitment to redefining what constitutes effective communication and learning. While the study provides context-rich insights, it acknowledges certain limitations. The qualitative, case-based design, though rich in depth, limits generalizability beyond Cotonou and similar urban Francophone settings. Additionally, the research was conducted within institutions that had at least nominal access to assistive technology; rural or severely under-resourced schools may present even more pronounced barriers not captured here.

Recommendations: In light of these findings and their implications for the Beninese educational context, the following actionable recommendations are proposed for policymakers, teacher education institutions, and EFL practitioners:

1. Institutionalize Inclusive Pedagogy in Teacher Education: The Écoles Normales d'Instituteurs and universities offering English teacher training in Cotonou should embed mandatory modules on accessibility, UDL principles, and multisensory EFL methodology into both pre-service and in-service programs. Training must move beyond theoretical awareness to include practicum-based coaching on adapting

textbooks, designing audio-based tasks, and using free screen reader software such as NVDA.

2. Develop Locally Relevant Accessible EFL Materials: The Ministry of Secondary, Technical and Professional Education, in collaboration with NGOs such as Light for the World and local associations of the visually impaired, should commission the production of Benin-specific EFL resources. These include audio versions of national syllabus texts, tactile maps for geography-related language tasks, and Braille glossaries aligned with the BEPC and Baccalaureate English exams. Digital repositories hosted by institutions like Université d'Abomey-Calavi could ensure equitable access.

3. Strengthen Infrastructure and Assistive Technology Provision: Schools in Cotonou and surrounding Littoral Department must be equipped with minimum accessibility infrastructure: computers with screen readers, refreshable Braille displays, and stable internet connectivity. Public-private partnerships with telecom providers and international donors can offset costs. Without reliable infrastructure, UDL principles remain unattainable despite pedagogical intent.

4. Reform Assessment Practices to Reflect Multisensory Competence: Examination bodies including the Direction des Examens et Concours should revise English proficiency assessments to reduce exclusive reliance on visually-presented items. Alternative formats such as oral examinations, audio comprehension tasks, and tactile-based activities should be standardized, ensuring that blind learners are evaluated on linguistic competence rather than visual access.

5. Foster Stakeholder Collaboration and Awareness: A coordinated forum involving teachers, blind learners, parents, school administrators, and disability advocacy groups should be established at the departmental level in Littoral. This platform would facilitate continuous feedback on inclusive practices, share classroom innovations, and dismantle attitudinal barriers that frame blindness as an educational deficit rather than a dimension of diversity.

Finally, the inclusion of blind learners in EFL classrooms in Cotonou demands systemic transformation rather than piecemeal adaptation. When pedagogy is differentiated, curricula are designed through a UDL lens, and teachers are empowered with inclusive knowledge, English language education becomes truly accessible. The

perspectives of blind learners themselves remind us that inclusion is ultimately about voice, participation, and dignity. Future research should expand this inquiry to rural Benin and longitudinally assess the impact of targeted interventions on language proficiency outcomes.

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