External factors and their effect on learning of English as a foreign impairment

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Abstract-   This qualitative study addressed the external factors that influence the experience of learning English as a foreign language among students who are visually impaired (VI). Overall, 28 university students with VI were interviewed about their experience of learning a foreign language (English) both in high school and in university. Three themes, representing external factors, emerged from the interviews: parents, peers, and English teachers. Findings showed that behavioural, academic, and parental expectations, and a stable and caring home setting, fostered participants' success in learning a foreign language. Furthermore, the study illustrated the importance of friends in aiding the success of individuals with VI, both socially and academically. Differences in the school atmosphere and culture regarding the inclusion of students with VI acted as either a promoting or impeding factor in motivating students with VI to succeed in their foreign language learning.

Keywords – Academic studies, English as a foreign language, external factors, visual impairment

I. INTRODUCTION

Visual impairment (VI) refers to an injury to the eye or to a neural injury in the visual system which cannot be repaired by visual aids. This impairment limits an individual's ability to recognize or see details in a sharp and accurate manner from a defined distance. Current literature points to different factors within the physical environment that may trigger responses of anxiety and insecurity among blind and visually impaired individuals (Gustafson-Pearce et al., 2005). In fact, most research on students with VI has thus far dealt with their immediate physical environment. Studies have found that students with VI can benefit from the use of assistive technologies when studying a foreign language specifically (Susanto & Nanda, 2018). In many countries, students with VI, akin to their sighted counterparts, must fulfil a foreign language requirement in English at their higher education institutions.

A review of the literature on second-language acquisition among learners with VI reveals various perspectives. Some researchers have claimed that individuals with VI follow the same patterns of learning as their sighted counterparts, provided that they have a reasonable threshold competence in the first language (Cummins, 1984). Other research has indicated that blind people are particularly well-equipped for foreign language acquisition as their impairment forces them to compensate for their visual deficiency by enhancing their other senses, especially their hearing (Morrissey, 1931; Pring, 2008). Further support for this view comes from Nikolic (1986), who claimed that blind people have great potential to acquire a foreign language successfully due to their increased aural sensitivity and intense memory training. Thus, he supports the teaching of foreign language(s) to students with VI within the framework of mainstream education, provided that the instructional material is adapted to their needs. In fact, Arslantas (2017) claims that when students with VI receive the adaptations needed for their disability, they can match the academic level of their sighted peers.

However, others have claimed that in the process of acquiring a foreign language, the differences between visually impaired and sighted individuals outweigh the similarities. According to Guinan (1997), the needs of individuals with VI are distinct from those of their sighted peers; in turn, these differing needs direct individuals with VI towards utilizing different routes when acquiring a second or foreign language. To compensate for their disability, students with VI employ mainly their hearing and motor–kinaesthetic senses (Susanto & Nanda, 2018). Guinan (1997) criticizes the oral–aural method, in which students first gain a good mastery of the language sound system before being introduced to vocabulary and grammar since students do not necessarily master speaking and

listening skills before reading and writing competencies. Moreover, for students with VI, the learning experience is different than that of sighted students, as students with VI are not exposed to the visual information in English that sighted people are bombarded with via road signs, television shows, and so on. As such, their minimal exposure to the written word negatively affects their spelling abilities, which is one of the most difficult skills to master, particularly in English. Arslantas (2017) claims that sight is a key factor in learning a language and that, therefore, students with VI find it challenging.

According to Susanto & Nanda (2018), second language instruction in the classroom is primarily visual and is based mostly on sensory exploration; therefore, the information that students with VI receive in the classroom is reduced and may even be distorted. Since they cannot learn a foreign language through visual exposure and experiences, they must rely on prior knowledge to understand what they hear.

A systems approach to the study of people with physical disabilities involves an examination of the dynamic processes of development; for example, examining the influence of one's personal characteristics and surrounding environment on behaviour (Llewellyn & Hogan, 2010). One such model that considers the influences of one's social environment on the development and functioning of the individual is Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development (1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Examples of environmental influences that directly impact the individual include school, close friends, family, and one's workplace (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). For instance, the physical environment of a school (e.g., whether or not the environment is easy to navigate and free from obstacles, whether or not the child's lighting needs are met in the context of a busy classroom) can affect the quality of education. In addition, other school-level factors, such as the availability of resources and teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, and the overall school atmosphere and culture, can impact the experiences of students with VI in the institution (de Boer et al., 2011b).

Furthermore, social interaction plays a crucial role in children's social and academic development (Roe, 2008); indeed, improving social competencies not only has a positive impact on children's interpersonal skills and the quality of their interactions but also on their academic achievement (Raufelder et al., 2013). Friendship – a relationship that necessitates mutuality and long-term stability – plays an important role in human development (Lifshitz et al., 2007). Within the context of friendship, individuals are provided with emotional resources (during both enjoyable and stressful circumstances) and cognitive resources (e.g., friends can help one with problemsolving and knowledge acquisition). Friendship also creates contexts in which basic social skills are acquired and strengthened (Dunn, 2004). In addition to the crucial role that friendship has on development during childhood, it seems to also hold a significant function later in life, specifically in increasing individuals' chances of academic success.

In his model for student retention, Tinto (2006) posited that students who become socially and academically integrated into their campus communities complete college at higher rates than do students who do not integrate. Both integration into the college community, and the patterns of interaction between the student and other members of the institution, were found to be especially important during the first year of college, as the first year is marked by a process of transition (Tinto 2006). When considering this model in regard to youths with special needs, and those with VIs in particular, the issue of integration and interaction with others may be revealed. Family members and service providers tend to be overprotective of them, which may limit the development of social skills necessary to integrate into their environments, especially the school environment (Hodges & Keller, 1999; Klinkosz et al., 2006). Furthermore, individuals with VI often feel uncomfortable discussing their impairment with their peers, and when they do establish a friendship, their impairment may provide unique challenges for both members of the friendship dyad (Rosenblum, 2000). Research suggests that college and university students with VI may suffer from social isolation, a limited number of friends and inadequate social abilities (Garb, 2000); these difficulties may be due to the fact that many skills that are necessary for social interaction are based on visual cues.

In many countries, as part of their higher education requirements, students are obliged to achieve a certain level of English. This study explored and analysed the external factors that influence the learning of English as a foreign language and general academic success among students with VI within the framework of a modified version of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development. Specifically, the study addressed the following external factors: parents, friends, and English teachers.

II. METHOS

A.   Participants

Overall, 28 university and college students defined as legally blind, agreed to participate in the study. All participants were in their first year of study. Of the 28 students, 19 were women and 9 were men. Students were

between the ages of 20 and 42 (mean age 25.4) years. Seven of the students were completely blind, whereas the rest were visually impaired.

B.   Procedure

The study used a qualitative approach, such that semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Participants were first told about the study purpose and design and then confirmed their consent to take part in the study. Prior to the interview, participants completed questionnaires that included questions about their socio-demographic characteristics, their impairment (age of onset, visual abilities etc.), and educational background. In the interview, participants were asked to describe their experiences related to learning English both in secondary school and in university. Interviews explored students' past learning experiences; the attitudes of parents and teachers towards them throughout the years; factors that they perceived as contributing to or hindering their learning process, particularly in learning English; their expectations of and experiences during their academic studies, such as contact with other students, tutors, and lecturers; and the use of assistive technologies and provision of accommodations. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

III. RESULTS

Three central themes emerged from the interviews regarding factors that had the most influence on the learning experience of students with VI: (1) English teachers (0.60%), (2) parents (0.25%), and (3) peers (0.15%). The influencing factors are arranged according to the number of times they were mentioned by the students in the interview.

Theme 1: the English teacher

An examination of the interviews revealed that the successful integration of students with VI into English classes at school depended, to a large extent, on the attitudes of the English teacher. Tali described the positive influence that her high school English teacher had on her, in such a way that motivated her to pursue English studies at the university level:

When I started my English studies in fourth grade, I had a really bad English teacher in school . . . Nothing stuck, it's as if I spent a whole year learning nothing . . . In 11th grade, a miracle happened, and a new English teacher came. A wonderful woman, and all of a sudden, it was like everything fell into place. She made me speak in English . . . and she also provided all the material in Braille and examined me orally. I was completely shocked! This created a complete change in my abilities. All of a sudden, I could learn and understand English. Thanks solely to her . . . I was accepted to a special program for visually impaired students and spent a year in Philadelphia. Now I love English so much that I decided to major in it in university.

Teachers' positive attitudes and their willingness to assist students with VI often resulted in positive school experiences for students and a greater motivation for learning. Another example is Reut's experience in English class, which was particularly positive in high school:

Whatever I asked for, she tried to accommodate me . . . She understood the need for enlarging the texts, and the oral aspect. It was very important to her to adjust to my needs. She was very caring and attentive.

An example of how teachers can foster student's motivation can be seen in Ortal's description of her high school English teacher who pushed her to try harder:

It was really easy to like her, she was really lovely. She believed me when I said it was difficult, she didn't think that I was trying to outsmart her or make my life easier because of my disability . . . Despite my disability, she never gave up on me . . . I saw that my grades gradually improved, and that gave me the motivation to try harder, and eventually to believe that I can do it!

However, not all participants found their teachers to be encouraging. For example, Avishag attributes her lack of English knowledge to her teacher's negative attitude:

I remember that I spent most of the time during my English lessons in elementary school sleeping, and my teacher never said anything. She never tried to find out what was going on, not during or after the lesson . . . I remember a time when the principal was supposed to watch the lesson. That was the only time she talked to me, to prepare me. She told me that I have to participate in class. Indeed, when the principal came to class, I cooperated, and even answered some of her questions. I was stunned, however, that the minute the principal left the classroom, she dismissed me again, as if I wasn't there.

Teachers' negative attitudes often led students to experience feelings of frustration, humiliation, and anger towards the teacher and the school as a whole. For example, Alon's English teacher was not helpful to him, leaving Alon to take care of his own needs:

In elementary school, I remember being completely detached from my studies . . . My English teacher told me that I should enlarge the class material by myself . . . sometimes I went outside of the classroom to make a copy of the material and just stayed out there, and didn't come back to class. Apparently, nobody noticed that I never came back . . . I'm angry, how can you expect a child in elementary school to take care of himself? She gave me the feeling that she preferred not to deal with me, never encouraging me or focusing on my strengths.

From the interviews, it appears that student–teacher relationships greatly influenced students' learning of a foreign language. Indeed, a growing body of literature has documented the role that students' feelings of belonging and the quality of their relationships inside the classroom has on their learning success. Overall, these quotes suggest that teachers' attentiveness and responsiveness to their students' needs have a significant impact on students' academic performance.

Theme 2: parents

In this study, the family as a whole, and parents in particular, were perceived to play a crucial role either in contributing to or hindering the learning experiences of students with VI. Some participants with VI associated their academic achievements with their parents' greater involvement in their studies and school experiences. Moreover, these participants noted that their parents often encouraged them to overcome their disability and communicated their high expectations and aspirations for them. They indicated that their parents often pushed them towards excellence and provided them with additional aids to advance them in their studies. This was particularly true in the case of learning English, which was perceived to be a significant tool for participants' integration into the academic setting and the 'real world'. Ziv, for example, described her mother's involvement in her studies:

Ever since I was a little girl, my mother always pushed me to try harder. She never showed me any leniency and she claimed that life may 'deal some difficult cards', and that I need to learn how to get along in the world of sighted people and that also includes learning English

Miri, another participant, attributed her academic success to her parents' encouragement and interest:

Since the school didn't really know how to handle having a blind student, my parents decided to give me additional tutoring, especially in English, beginning in fourth grade. They always encouraged me and told me that I am no different from any of the other children. So, even at home, I had to take part in the household chores, even though I couldn't really see what I was doing.

Parents can undermine their child's self-confidence because of over-protectiveness and concerns about their child becoming independent. Ness describes how her parents conveyed their fears and doubts about her abilities in different stages in life:

My parents had many fears that ran deep. I still don't know how to ride a bike because they said I couldn't do it because of my eyes, and that I wouldn't have balance. I disagree and think that I can still learn how to ride. Even in school I had some difficulties in English and they thought I couldn't make it, that a foreign language is beyond my abilities. They never said it out-loud but the feeling of not really believing in my own abilities was always there, hidden, implicit, but still there. Even now when I wanted to go to university, my parents were terrified of how I would be able to handle the classes and studies. They always raised questions that led me to feel that they didn't trust me or my abilities.

Overall, on the topic of family, and parents in particular, the interviewees indicated that a number of factors fostered their psychological and intellectual development, and promoted academic and personal growth: behavioural and academic expectations of them; encouragement of their skills and efforts; and a stable and caring home setting. The overall picture that arises from participants' quotes illustrates the importance of both moral and practical support in the educational achievements of students with VI, particularly in English.

Theme 3: peers

The participants noted that they had friendships in which they were respected. They valued their peers and attributed their social integration both inside the classroom and outside of school to the fact that they had close friends. Compared to parents, friends were less involved in assisting the participants in school. Nonetheless, the ability to form connections with others in college/university contributed to their success in English and in other subjects. Some differences were found with regard to the type of close friends that participants had. Some had close friends who were also visually impaired, whereas others preferred to distance themselves from other visually impaired individuals and instead chose to form close relations with sighted students. In regard to the importance of close friendships, Ness described how her boyfriend made a significant difference in her life. Ness and her boyfriend, Ilan, had been schoolmates since elementary school. While in high school, Ness and Ilan's relationship evolved to be of a romantic nature. At that point, Ness realized that she and Ilan were not so different when it came to their intellectual abilities:

I finally understood that it's all a matter of attitude. He really motivated me to be better, and the longer I stayed with him, the more motivated I became . . . at first, I decided to give up on English because I felt I couldn't deal with the difficulty of learning a foreign language. He didn't give up on me, and he encouraged me to learn English in high school. His influence was so strong, that once I finished high school, I felt I could easily go to university, with no problem whatsoever.

In another example, Inbal described her experience with one of her classmates, who was a friendly and outgoing young man.

I truly owe him. Without him, I would never have become who I am today. Thanks to him, I learned how to talk to people, and to express my thoughts and opinions. Once I met Danny, I learned how to form social ties, how to look people in the eye while talking to them, how to interact and be part of a group. I was able to talk to the teachers, and ask for what I needed, and to get help whenever I encountered difficulties . . . I couldn't believe it, but I even insisted that they move me to the 5-point [highest-level] matriculation class in English. It's funny, but when I graduated, I received an award for social excellence. He really changed my life for the better.

The interview responses illustrate the importance of peers in making visually impaired individuals feel more accepted and helping them to be both socially and academically successful – factors that are important for nurturing students' well-being. Moreover, from the interviews, it became clear that friends could also help each other academically, for example, through encouragement to learn a foreign language.

IV. DISCUSSION

This study examined the effects of external factors on the learning of English as a foreign language among visually impaired students. In particular, it investigated the impact of individuals in the immediate environment of VI students (e.g., family, peers, and English teachers) on students' ability to acquire a foreign language. The results are based on college and university students' reports on these aspects of their lives.

According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of development, a person's development is linked to his or her context or environment; this environment is made up of nested systems ranging from the microsystem to the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). According to the model, the microsystem includes the relationships that an individual has with people in the immediate environment, that is, people who are present in his or her life on a fairly regular basis over extended periods. The relationships between the individual and those in his or her immediate environment influence his or her engagement and interaction with the general environment. Examples of microsystems are one's school, close friends, family, and workplace (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The influencing factors identified in this study as the main influences on visually impaired students' acquisition of a foreign language are those that characterize the microsystem in the ecological systems model.

The first external factor that was found to be of importance in influencing the learning experiences of students with VI was their parents' attitudes, and the practical and moral support they received from their parents. In the case of individuals with VI, parental perceptions and expectations regarding VIs can have a negative effect on their personal and social development (Cimarolli & Boerner, 2005). Research has indicated that parents of children with VI tend to expect less of them, which may in turn hinder children's development and lead to them accomplishing fewer goals. Overprotection, over-assistance, denial, and negative parental attitudes may inhibit visually impaired children's development; for example, their initiative-taking, their independence, and the realization of their abilities. In addition, research has shown that a family's level of cognitive and emotional functioning is associated with children's social and intellectual competence, and that the family system has the greatest influence on children's personal and educational development (de Boer et al., 2011; George & Duquette, 2006).

From the students' interviews, it was evident that most parents followed the behavioural patterns described in the research literature; in other words, it appears that parents of children with VI treated them differently than their sighted children. The participants often reported that their parents were unable to disregard the disability, and that they expressed feelings of anxiety and distress for them. Participants believed that these perceptions and feelings often influenced their parents' behaviour and attitudes towards them, leading to over-protectiveness and over-assistance, with parents regularly attempting to keep their children from experiencing any discomforts or confronting obstacles that they might encounter due to their impairment, even lowering their expectations of their children. Thus, some participants claimed that, despite the helpful practical support provided by their parents, their parents' over-protectiveness and lower expectations made them feel as if their parents did not really believe in their abilities. This undermined their selfesteem and feelings of competency, which, in turn, had an effect on their motivation for learning and their academic achievements.

However, some participants attributed their academic achievements to their parents' substantial involvement in their studies and school experiences. These parents often encouraged their children to overcome their disability and had high expectations and aspirations for them. They often pushed their children towards excellence and provided them with additional resources to help them advance in their studies. This was particularly true when it came to learning English, as these parents perceived English as an asset for integrating into both the academic and 'real' world. These results are in line with Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological model according to which families, and parents in particular, define the development of an individual.

The second factor that was found to be influential to the learning a foreign language among students with VI was the English teacher. Findings indicated that teachers played a crucial role in either contributing to or impeding the learning process among students with VI. English teachers' attitudes towards the students, in the context of their VI, played a significant role in students' feelings of inclusion in class, and their academic success. Whereas positive attitudes and helpful behaviour resulted in positive experiences and learning outcomes for students with VI, negative attitudes were met with a host of unfavourable feelings towards not only the teacher but also to the school more generally. Previous research has emphasized the critical association between the quality of teacher–student relationships and students' academic engagement and involvement (Roorda et al., 2011). Specifically, in regard to visually impaired students, studies have shown that teachers' expectations and behaviours towards them had an effect on students' success or failure in class. Namely, teachers who embraced an inclusive philosophy and saw beyond the disability often expressed confidence in the abilities of visually impaired students and attempted to capitalize on the strengths of the students (George & Duquette, 2006). Moreover, research has shown that to facilitate the successful inclusion of students with VI, teachers must exhibit flexibility in teaching methods, show positive attitudes towards students with disabilities and promote the inclusion of such students into typical classrooms (Sharma et al., 2010).

The relationship that develops between a student and a teacher can be a powerful factor that enhances students' motivation for learning (Raufelder et al., 2013). Relationships with teachers may also have an impact on students' academic achievement; for example, if students are motivated to seek approval from their teachers, they may employ achievement-related behaviours to meet this goal. Finally, supportive relationships with teachers may enhance students' motivation to learn and actively participate, even in subjects that were traditionally of little interest to them (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004).

There is growing evidence that perceptions of support from teachers affect students' psychological adjustment. Elementary school students who reported more positive bonds with their teachers obtained higher scores on self- and teacher-reported social and emotional adjustment outcomes (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003). Teacher support also appears to influence psychological adjustment among older students. Middle school students who deliberately sought to promote their relationships with their teachers tended to have fewer adjustment difficulties during the transition to middle school (Davis et al., 2010; Roorda et al., 2011). Other researchers have emphasized the impact of positive student–teacher relationships on students' social development, noting that teacher support promoted not only the development of children's and adolescents' academic and behavioural skills but also their emotional skills. These findings suggest that teacher support can help to buffer some of the stress associated with school and, at least partially, offset the risk of adjustment difficulties (Cornelius-White, 2007; Davis, 2003; Martin & Dowson, 2009).

In school settings, students with VI utilize different media to access the curriculum, including enlarged print, audio materials, and Braille (George & Duquette, 2006). Making the curriculum accessible to students with VI is part of teachers' responsibility, which makes the students more dependent on their teachers' help than their sighted peers. As a result, teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with VI in a typical classroom are extremely important when it comes to motivating and encouraging them. They may also encourage socialization with peers through the use of cooperative learning strategies (Lee & Shute, 2010). This inclusive approach often results in greater social and emotional integration of students with VI with their peers, and greater academic success (Raufelder et al., 2013).

This is also in line with the developmental contextualism theory (Gottlieb, 1997), a theory of human development that focuses on the interactions between a person and his or her context. It supports the findings of this study, which indicate the significant effect of peers and teachers on students with VI studying English as a foreign language.

The third factor that was found to be the least influential to the success of students with VI in learning a foreign language was peers. People with VI suffer greatly from loneliness, as vision is crucial in creating social interactions and in seizing opportunities to form relations (Brunes et al., 2019). The students with VI who do form relations with peers felt their friends helped them to be more socially accepted in their communities and to become more academically successful. As previously mentioned, people need to engage in social interaction to maximize their social development. The importance of social interaction is particularly true for individuals with VI who often need to rely on others to overcome some of the visual access limitations they experience, as well to help them make connections and develop their understanding of the world (Kef et al., 2000). Thus, the support of peers can have important consequences for student well-being. Whereas previous research has indicated that individuals with VI often have fewer social interactions and fewer friends (Garb, 2000), the participants in this study felt that the interactions they had with others could be characterized as close friendships. In addition to the social implications, close ties with peers enhanced the ability of students with VI to learn a foreign language. Participants noted that their friendships with others were, in fact, beneficial to their success in their English studies. Friends are part of an individual's 'microsystem' and thus the finding on the strong impact of friendships in this context aligns with Bronfenbrenner's (1994) model.

All of the factors described are even more salient when considering the process of learning a foreign language among students with VI. These students are not exposed to the English language visually (e.g., through street signs, billboards, TV, and other media) as are other students; therefore, they mostly rely on their English teacher to foster their language learning.

V. IMPLICATIONS

The above findings point to the significant role that parents and teachers play in the academic development of students with VI. Unlike students without VI, students with VI rely more heavily on the guidance and support of their teachers and parents in mediating the academic realm. Teachers' and parents' involvement in the academic life of students with VI influences goals setting and gives the students hope in achieving these goals. It also impacts the way the students perceive themselves and their academic abilities. This support is also evident in their assisting of the students with VI manage bureaucracy (coordinating learning and testing accommodations). Due to the nature of the disability, parents' and teachers' responsibility and involvement should be greater when dealing with students with VI. In addition, every institution should employ a coordinator for students with VI who will provide support and cater to their physical and learning needs (e.g., enlarging the size of exams, photocopying, coordinating tutoring lessons, providing access to assistive technologies). The students with VI should be informed by the educational institution of the person in charge of accommodations.

VI. LIMITATIONS

The current study provided an in-depth examination of the external factors that promote learning a foreign language among students with VI. Nevertheless, the study contained a number of limitations. One limitation concerns the small number of participants; however, this is due primarily to the limited number of students who are visually impaired within the higher educational system. In addition, the study examined only the experiences of students with VI, and thus the results cannot be generalized to the larger population of students with disabilities. Another limitation is that the participants were mostly women, which is not representative of the larger VI population. While this study provides a good initial picture of the external factors that impact the learning of English among students who are visually impaired, a broader set of measures might have provided additional insight into the students' experiences. Factors in the macrosystem, such as the school system, the students' socioeconomic status, and their culture could provide a better understanding of the factors affecting the success of students with VI in higher education.

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