

Unlocking the Stories of Visually Impaired Learners about English Language Learning

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About the Author

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Abstract

The present study explores the challenges and coping strategies of visually impaired college students in learning English. I used narrative inquiry as a research design. Conducted at Mahendra Ratna Multiple Campus, Ilam, I purposively selected two female students from the English Education program to gain insights into their experiences. Information was collected through in-depth interviews, allowing for a rich exploration of their personal narratives. Findings revealed significant challenges, including a lack of accessible learning materials, inadequate instructional methods, and social isolation, which hinder their academic progress. Additionally, the students employed various coping strategies, such as peer support and assistive technology, to overcome these obstacles. This research emphasizes the need for enhanced educational practices and resources that address the needs of visually impaired learners, aiming to promote a more inclusive learning environment.

Keywords: visually impaired, narrative inquiry, English language learning, coping strategies, educational challenges

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Context Setting

The Constitution of Nepal guarantees the right to education for all citizens, including persons with disabilities. Article 31(3) explicitly states that citizens with disabilities and economically indigent citizens shall have the right to free higher education as provided for in law (Constitution of Nepal, 2072). Similarly, there is the provision of special education and facilities for students with disabilities, including visually impaired students (Education Act, 1971). Moreover, the Inclusive Education Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2016) focuses on inclusive education and outlines strategies to support students with disabilities by providing Braille textbooks and other learning materials, giving training to teachers to teach students with disabilities, and making school infrastructure accessible. However, research indicates that despite these legal provisions, the actual access to education for visually impaired students remains limited due to insufficient resources, lack of trained teachers and inadequate infrastructure (Kafle & Mainali, 2020). The visually impaired students are compelled to get higher education without having sufficient Braille textbooks and other assistive technologies. Furthermore, many teachers are not adequately trained to support visually impaired students, which affects the quality of education (Sharma & Das, 2019). These indicate that visually impaired students have many problems that they have been encountering in the process of learning.

The available literature in this area shows that visually impaired students face numerous barriers in higher education, particularly in the realm of English language learning. Accessibility issues, such as the lack of Braille materials, screen readers, and other assistive technologies, can significantly hinder their academic progress (Baker & McCarthy, 2022). Additionally, pedagogical methods

may not always be adapted to meet the needs of visually impaired learners, leading to disparities in educational outcomes (Johnson & Williams, 2021). Obviously, I agree with Johnson & Williams in the sense that I am a teacher at a college, where I have to teach students who are visually impaired, but to date, I haven't employed any new pedagogical approaches to address their needs and desires. I haven't even tried to ask them how they were taught, so that they feel easy to get the content. Despite advancements in accessibility technology and inclusive education policies in many countries, challenges persist in ensuring equitable access and support (Smith et al., 2023).

In Nepal, the situation is similarly challenging, though the context differs in specific ways. The infrastructure in many Nepali higher education institutions often lacks the necessary accommodations for visually impaired students, such as accessible course materials and assistive technologies (Sharma & Shrestha, 2021). Obviously, it is true that these students have been facing all these problems along with the problem of physical infrastructure in the workplace where I have been teaching. There is a three-story building, and I take some of the classes on the first and second floors too. These visually impaired students have to be in the class with other normal students. It means to say that most of the buildings are not disability-friendly.

English language education, which is a key component of many academic programs, poses additional challenges, and resources for visually impaired students are often limited or unavailable (Rai & Bhandari, 2022). While there are governmental and non-governmental efforts to support visually impaired individuals, the integration of these support systems into the educational framework remains inconsistent, affecting the quality of assistance provided (Karki & Thapa, 2023). Furthermore, cultural attitudes and social humiliation towards disabilities can aggravate these challenges, influencing the level of accommodation and inclusivity within educational institutions (Maharjan, 2020). Addressing these issues is crucial for improving educational outcomes and ensuring equal opportunities for visually impaired students in Nepal.

I have been teaching in a constituent campus of TU for seven years. On campus, I teach English to students of all years (1st year to 4th year) under the faculty of education. Since the beginning of my teaching career on campus, I have been teaching more than fifty students in a single class. While teaching such a large number of students, every year I have found some visually impaired students in my class. I do not have many more ideas regarding the strategies that I have to follow to assist such visually disturbed students. What I have been doing is teaching all the students in the same way, applying the same method and technique.

As a college-level teacher, I have been teaching visually impaired students alongside their sighted peers without implementing specific pedagogical adaptations. This prompted me to investigate the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to make their learning process more effective and meaningful.

Research Purposes

The present study has the following two purposes:

1. To explore and identify the specific challenges faced by visually impaired college students in learning English.
2. To understand the coping strategies and support mechanisms utilized by visually impaired students to overcome the difficulties in English language learning within higher education settings.

Research Questions

In order to address the research purposes, this study aims to explore the following research questions:

1. What are the primary challenges encountered by visually impaired college students in learning English, and how do these challenges impact their academic performance and engagement?
2. How do visually impaired college students adapt their learning strategies and use available resources to overcome obstacles in English language learning?

Review of the Related Literature

Visually impaired students are individuals whose vision loss significantly impacts their educational experiences, requiring adaptations for accessible learning. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), visual impairment ranges from low vision, where some functional sight remains, to complete blindness. In educational contexts, these students may need specific accommodations like Braille materials, screen readers, or tactile tools to support their engagement with curriculum content (Kelly & Smith, 2018). Unlike students with full sight, visually impaired learners often rely on auditory and tactile learning channels to process information, which calls for specialized teaching strategies (Dalton & Lyner-Cleophas, 2020). Inclusive practices that acknowledge these unique needs help visually impaired students fully participate in academic environments, allowing them to access the same learning opportunities as their peers while mitigating barriers to success (Saha & Roy, 2022).

The experiences of visually impaired learners in the process of learning English as a second or foreign language have been explored from various perspectives across different contexts. This review organizes the literature into key thematic areas, namely: challenges faced by visually impaired learners, pedagogical strategies for supporting them, social and emotional experiences, the use of assistive technology, and inclusive education policies.

Visually impaired learners face unique challenges in the process of learning a new language, particularly when the medium of instruction and materials are not designed considering their needs and interests. Studies have highlighted that visually impaired students often struggle with accessing written materials due to the dominance of sight-dependent instructional resources (Dalton & Lyner-Cleophas, 2020). In many cases, traditional textbooks, written assignments, and visual aids are not adapted into formats accessible to these learners, hindering their language acquisition process. Research in the United States presents that the unavailability of Braille textbooks and digital materials severely limits learners' engagement with the course content (Brady, 2019)

In Nepal, the situation is more challenging. Visually impaired students in rural schools often lack even basic resources, such as textbooks in Braille or access to digital learning tools like screen readers (Sharma, 2017). The situation is worsened by a lack of trained teachers capable of modifying instructional methods for visually impaired students, leaving many learners behind in classrooms, especially in subjects like English that depend heavily on reading and writing activities.

To address these challenges, educators have experimented with various pedagogical strategies. Globally, multi-sensory approaches incorporating tactile learning tools and auditory resources have proven effective (Borg & De Pietro, 2021). These methods, especially useful in language learning, enhance visually impaired students' language proficiency by focusing on listening and speaking through interactive activities, such as auditory books, verbal instructions, and collaborative learning.

In Nepal, however, inclusive classrooms remain an aspirational goal. Some schools in urban areas have begun using tactile materials like raised-line drawings to teach English, focusing on grammar and vocabulary acquisition (Paudel, 2019). Nonetheless, a lack of systematic teacher training and inadequate government funding prevent the widespread adoption of these strategies across the country.

The social and emotional experiences of visually impaired learners are critical to their language learning journey. Visually impaired students frequently experience a sense of isolation in mainstream classrooms due to physical and attitudinal barriers (Saha & Roy, 2022). This emotional disconnect can reduce self-esteem and motivation, as learners are often excluded from classroom interactions. Studies conducted in India found that visually impaired learners struggle with these issues due to the lack of inclusive practices in many educational institutions.

In Nepal, visually impaired students face even more significant social challenges, especially in rural areas. The lack of awareness about disabilities among peers and teachers results in unintended marginalization (Koirala,

2020). Students often report feeling alienated during group work or classroom discussions, which negatively impacts their confidence and participation in English language learning activities. The societal stigma associated with disability further compounds these emotional challenges, making academic success more difficult.

Assistive technology plays a pivotal role in making language learning more accessible for visually impaired learners. Tools like screen readers, audio books, and speech-to-text software enable learners to engage more fully with course materials (Kelly & Smith, 2018). Visually impaired students with access to these technologies are better able to complete language assignments, particularly in subjects that require extensive reading and writing.

In Nepal, access to such assistive technologies remains limited. Only a few urban schools and colleges provide screen readers and similar tools, while most visually impaired learners in rural areas cannot afford them (Dhungana, 2021). Although the government has made efforts to introduce assistive technologies in schools, the implementation has been slow and inconsistent, forcing many students to rely on traditional methods like audio recordings or oral instructions, which restrict independent learning.

Globally, inclusive education policies are designed to provide equal educational opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities. In countries like the United Kingdom and Australia, educational institutions are required to create accessible learning environments through specialized learning materials, teacher training, and accommodations for visually impaired learners (Johnston, 2019).

In Nepal, while the government has made progress in promoting inclusive education, practical implementation is still lacking. The Ministry of Education introduced an "Inclusive Education Policy" in 2016, aimed at improving access to education for disabled students (Acharya, 2018). However, many schools have not yet adopted these guidelines, particularly in rural regions. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for teacher training programs to equip educators with the skills

required to teach visually impaired learners effectively.

Through a review of existing literature on the challenges, pedagogical strategies, social experiences, and technological tools relevant to visually impaired learners, I sought to bridge the gap between the theoretical understanding of inclusive education and the practical realities faced by these students, especially in Ilam, Nepal, where resources and awareness are limited. By conducting this study, I aim to enhance the learning experiences of visually impaired learners by identifying effective strategies and shedding light on the systemic barriers that hinder their progress.

Methodology

I employed the narrative inquiry as a research design to conduct this study, which attempts to explore the stories of the visually-impaired students about the English language learning. Especially, the study has focused on two issues: challenges faced by the visually impaired students in the process of English language learning at the higher level and the learning strategies and available resources they employ to overcome obstacles in English language learning. To this end, I purposively selected two students from Mahendra Ratna Multiple Campus, Ilam. They are Kanchan and Laxmi (Pseudonyms). Kanchan is a student in her third year of bachelor's. She belongs to English education. She has passed both the first year and the second year, scoring good marks. She is one of the top five students of her batch. Similarly, Laxmi is a student in her second year of bachelor's. She also belongs to the English education. She is an average student. She has passed the first-year exam in the second division. She is hopeful to complete her bachelor's degree clearly. Both Kanchan and Laxmi are visually impaired students. They are disciplined, honest, and hardworking students of the class.

To collect the information from them for this study, I asked for their formal consent at first. After that, I conducted in-depth interviews individually for rich information based on the developed interview guidelines. The interview was conducted in face-to-face mode. I recorded the interview on my cellphone.

I conducted the interview in an open and nonthreatening environment, based on the major issues of the study. During the interview, I kept asking the questions to get the required information for the study. When the interview is over, I transcribe the record of the interview, listening to the audio record minutely. The interview was conducted in the Nepali language, but I transcribed it in English. After the transcription of the interview taken from both Kanchan and Laxmi, it was coded, categorized and thematically analyzed. I employed a ‘reflexive thematic analysis’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006) approach to analyze the collected information.

Findings and Discussion

As the study aimed to explore the challenges faced by the visually impaired students in the process of English language learning at the higher level and the learning strategies and available resources they employ to overcome obstacles in English language learning, I analyzed and interpreted the obtained information, and the findings have been presented in the following two major themes, followed by other sub-themes.

Challenges Faced by Visually Impaired Learners

The study revealed several interconnected challenges that visually impaired students face in learning English, particularly concerning the accessibility of learning materials, reliance on visual instruction methods, assessment barriers, and the social isolation that often arises due to inadequate support and limited adaptation to their learning needs. These barriers align with previous findings by Dalton and Lyner-Cleophas (2020), which emphasize the difficulties that visually impaired students encounter due to the heavy reliance on visual materials and insufficient access to alternative formats.

Lack of Accessible Learning Materials

Lack of accessible learning materials is one of the challenges often faced by visually impaired learners. It is stated that access to appropriate learning materials is crucial for the academic success of visually impaired learners. Dalton and Lyner-Cleophas (2020) point out that traditional instructional resources often overlook the needs of these students, which can hinder their learning process. In

this regard, one of my respondents (Kanchan) said:

Sometimes, the materials provided are only available in print, which makes it difficult for me to access and read them effectively. I wish there were more accessible options, such as Braille textbooks or digital formats with screen-reader compatibility, to support inclusive learning for visually impaired students.

The saying of Kanchan highlights the significant barrier posed by the lack of accessible materials, reflecting the findings of Brady (2019), who observed that the limited availability of Braille textbooks severely restricts engagement with course contents.

In contrast, Laxmi stated, “Even if I have some materials, they are often too difficult to understand or not designed for my needs”. This illustrates her struggle with the complexity of existing resources, indicating a broader issue of material inadequacy as noted by Sharma (2017), who pointed out that many visually impaired students in Nepal lack basic resources, further worsening their learning challenges.

Inadequate Instructional Methods

Inadequate instructional methods create significant barriers for students, preventing them from achieving effective learning outcomes. When teaching strategies fail to address diverse learning needs, students may struggle to grasp key concepts, remain engaged, or develop essential skills. There can be diverse students in a classroom, and a teacher has to teach them, understanding their way of learning. But, in our context, most of the teachers teach using the same method, which does not help all students learn. In this line, my respondent Kanchan mentioned:

My teacher treats us just like other students, which makes me feel included. However, as a visually impaired student, I believe using specific techniques would improve my learning experience. For example, providing tactile materials, offering audio descriptions, or giving extra time for tasks could make lessons more accessible and effective for me.

Her perspective suggests that conventional teaching methods may not be sufficient for visually impaired learners, aligning with the assertion by Koirala (2020) that lack of trained teachers limits the implementation of effective instructional strategies in Nepal. Similarly, Laxmi, next respondents of my study shared her view as, “I sometimes feel lost in class because I can’t follow the written lessons. A different approach would really help.” Her insights reflect the necessity for individual focused instructional methods to ensure inclusivity, supporting the call for more targeted teacher training as highlighted in the literature.

Assessment and Evaluation Barriers

Challenges in assessment and evaluation present another significant obstacle for visually impaired learners. Assessment practices often lack the accommodations necessary for fair evaluation, as noted by Johnston (2019), who highlights that standardized assessments generally do not consider the needs of students with disabilities. Kanchan reflected on this challenge, stating, “Exams are the hardest part for me. Since everything is written, I miss out on many details and end up scoring lower.” This insight emphasizes the restrictive nature of conventional assessment formats, underscoring the need for alternative or adapted evaluation methods. It is associated with the perspective shared by Dhungana (2021), who observed that visually impaired students in Nepal face difficulties during assessments due to the limited availability of accessible testing formats. Similarly, Laxmi mentioned,

When exams are only in written form, I feel like they don’t truly reflect my knowledge but rather test how well I can cope with my visual challenges. As a visually impaired student, I believe alternative assessment methods, such as oral exams or the use of assistive technology, could better evaluate my understanding.

This very saying of Laxmi highlights the mismatch between her abilities and the format of assessments, indicating that current evaluation practices may not accurately capture her knowledge and skills. The experiences shared by both

students reflect a need for more inclusive assessment methods, as advocated by Acharya (2018), who emphasized that accessible evaluation systems are critical to ensuring equitable educational outcomes for all students, including those with visual impairments.

Social Isolation and Emotional Challenges

Social and emotional factors significantly impact the learning experiences of visually impaired students. Research by Saha and Roy (2022) emphasizes that emotional disconnect can adversely affect self-esteem and motivation. Kanchan, a respondent of my study, articulated this by stating, “Sometimes, I feel isolated during group activities, and it makes me doubt my abilities.” Her feelings of isolation underline the emotional pain that social dynamics can have on learning, corroborating the findings of Koirala (2020), which indicate that students often feel marginalized due to a lack of awareness about disabilities.

On the other hand, Laxmi expressed, “I often hesitate to participate in discussions because I’m afraid of being judged. It makes me feel like I don’t belong.” This indicates her struggle with confidence, illustrating the societal stigma surrounding disabilities. The emotional experiences articulated by both students associate with existing literature, which stresses the need for supportive social environments to enhance the academic success of visually impaired learners.

Coping Strategies Employed by Visually Impaired Learners

The study also revealed a range of strategies that visually impaired learners employ to navigate the challenges of language learning. These include using alternative resources, seeking support from peers and teachers, focusing on oral and auditory learning, employing tactile learning techniques, and managing time effectively to compensate for the lack of accessible materials and resources.

Utilization of Audio and Digital Resources

Audio and digital resources are instrumental in supporting visually impaired students in their studies. According to Kelly and Smith (2018), these tools provide essential access to educational content, particularly when printed materials are

inaccessible. In this vein, Kanchan shared, “Audio books and screen readers help me follow the syllabus. Without these, I’d be lost.” Her dependance on digital resources indicates their role as indispensable tools in bridging accessibility gaps. This finding aligns with Dhungana (2021), who emphasizes the effectiveness of audio resources in supplementing limited material availability for visually impaired students in Nepal, particularly in enhancing comprehension and retention through auditory channels. In this context Laxmi’s view resemble the views of Kanchan. Regarding this, Laxmi mentioned:

I use recorded lectures to catch up on any parts of the lesson I missed or didn’t fully understand during class. As a visually impaired student, having access to these recordings helps me review the material at my own pace, ensuring I can grasp the concepts more effectively.

This practice of reviewing lectures through audio recordings shows her proactive approach in adapting resources to her needs. Research by Borg and De Pietro (2021) highlights the significance of audio-based tools for students with visual impairments, noting that they enhance engagement and allow students to access course content at their own pace.

Peer and Teacher Support

Support from peers and teachers serves as a key coping strategy, providing visually impaired students with guidance and academic assistance. Brady (2019) suggests that fostering a collaborative learning environment is vital for students with disabilities, as it helps them to integrate more fully into the classroom setting. In this line, Kanchan mentioned, “I often ask friends for help with notes and explanations on topics I missed.” Her approach highlights the value of a supportive peer network, reflecting the findings by Saha and Roy (2022) that peer assistance alleviates some challenges faced by visually impaired students by fostering a sense of inclusion and confidence.

Similarly, Laxmi stated, “Sometimes, I reach out to my teacher when I don’t understand the content, and they provide me with additional guidance.” This dependance on teacher support demonstrates her adaptive approach, using

available resources to overcome obstacles. Koirala (2020) further supports this perspective, noting that when teachers adapt their instruction and offer individualized support, visually impaired students show improved engagement and academic performance.

Focus on Oral and Listening Skills

With limitations in accessing written material, visually impaired students tend to develop and rely on their oral and listening skills as primary means of learning. Dalton and Lyner-Cleophas (2020) argue that strong listening skills are crucial for visually impaired students, enabling them to effectively absorb information presented verbally in class. The respondent of my study Kanchan remarked:

I pay close attention to what's being said in lectures because listening is my primary way of accessing information. As a visually impaired student, I rely heavily on spoken explanations and discussions to understand the material, making clear and detailed verbal instruction essential for my learning process.

This focus on listening reinforces the importance of oral instruction as a critical learning channel, echoing findings from Johnston (2019), which highlight how visually impaired students strengthen listening comprehension as a compensatory strategy.

Laxmi also shared, "I try to remember everything discussed in class, especially key points, since it's harder for me to refer back to written notes." Her experience illustrates the necessity of strengthening verbal learning and memory retention, aligning with Borg and De Pietro's (2021) emphasis on the importance of listening skills as a core component of education for visually impaired learners.

Tactile and Memory-Based Learning Techniques

Tactile and memory-based learning techniques are often employed by visually impaired students as adaptive strategies. Research suggests that these students develop advanced memory retention skills to compensate for limited visual input (Brady, 2019). Kanchan shared, "I use tactile resources whenever

available, and I try to memorize content during lectures to aid my study process.” Her use of tactile and memory techniques highlights the importance of multisensory learning, a finding supported by Sharma (2017), who argues that tactile learning aids help visually impaired students interact with material in a more meaningful way.

Similarly, Laxmi noted, “I focus on remembering the concepts as I learn them, which helps me retain information for exams.” Her trust in memory-based learning reflects the resilience and adaptability needed to thrive academically, underscoring the value of cognitive strategies in addressing learning challenges. This approach aligns with Dalton and Lyner-Cleophas’s (2020) perspective on the role of cognitive learning techniques for visually impaired students, which enable them to retain information even when physical resources are unavailable.

Time Management and Advance Preparation

Effective time management and advanced preparation are crucial strategies for visually impaired students who may need additional time to process information. Kelly and Smith (2018) highlight the importance of structured time management in ensuring that visually impaired students are adequately prepared for class assignments and exams. Related to this context, Kanchan mentioned:

I prepare in advance by reviewing materials using my screen reader to stay on track with the course. As a visually impaired student, this practice helps me understand the content better and participate actively in class discussions, ensuring I can keep up with the pace of the lessons.

This approach reflects her proactive strategy in organizing her studies, a theme echoed in Koirala’s (2020) research, which found that visually impaired students who manage their time efficiently experience reduced stress and improved academic performance.

Likewise, Laxmi stated, “I allocate extra time for reading and revising because it takes me longer to go through the material.” Her emphasis on time management demonstrates her strategic approach to coping with accessibility challenges, supporting Saha and Roy’s (2022) findings that advanced preparation

enables visually impaired students to better navigate academic demands. The students' experiences highlight time management as an essential factor in their academic resilience, indicating that these skills are fundamental for overcoming educational barriers.

Conclusion

This research has uncovered a wide range of challenges faced by visually impaired learners in English language learning, including difficulties with inaccessible course materials, reliance on visual teaching methods, limited access to assistive technology, and the emotional strain of social isolation. Both participants, Kanchan and Laxmi, highlighted how these barriers hinder their ability to fully engage in the learning process. These findings are associated with existing literature, particularly regarding the inadequacies in instructional methods and the lack of resources tailored to visually impaired learners. The emotional challenges further emphasize the importance of an inclusive and empathetic educational environment, as supported by studies like those of Saha and Roy (2022) and Brady (2019).

Despite these challenges, the study also revealed the strategies these learners have developed to cope with and overcome their difficulties. The use of audio resources, reliance on peers and teachers for support, focusing on oral and listening skills, and time management emerged as key coping mechanisms. These strategies highlight the resilience and adaptability of visually impaired students in directing an educational system that often fails to meet their needs. These findings are consistent with the literature on the importance of multi-sensory approaches and assistive technologies for visually impaired learners (Borg & De Pietro, 2021; Kelly & Smith, 2018).

As a teacher of some visually impaired students, I now realize that while I have been teaching them as I would other students, it is clear that their unique needs require more specialized attention. This research has motivated me to rethink my instructional methods and look for strategies that better support visually impaired learners. The interviews with Kanchan and Laxmi have

provided valuable insight into their lived experiences, and I am committed to using this knowledge to create a more inclusive learning environment. This study serves as a reminder that inclusive education is not merely about physical presence in the classroom but ensuring that all learners, regardless of their abilities, have equal access to learning opportunities.

Future research could benefit from larger participant groups to explore a broader range of challenges and coping mechanisms used by visually impaired learners in diverse educational settings. Additionally, longitudinal studies examining the long-term impact of specific inclusive teaching practices on visually impaired students' language proficiency would contribute valuable insights. Exploring the perspectives of teachers and policymakers on implementing inclusive strategies could also provide a more comprehensive view of the systemic barriers and solutions.

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