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THE CHALLENGES OF LEARNING ENGLISH AMONG DEAF LEARNERS

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Abstract

The acquisition of English by deaf and hard-of-hearing students presents distinctive challenges associated with differences in communication, language processing, and access to auditory input. This article examines the major difficulties encountered by deaf learners in developing English language skills, particularly in listening comprehension, pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition, and classroom communication. The study highlights how individual differences in hearing ability, the use of hearing aids or cochlear implants, and reliance on sign language can influence learners' experiences and educational needs. Particular attention is given to the challenges that arise when English instruction relies predominantly on auditory input and spoken communication. The article also considers the role of accessible teaching practices, including visual aids, sign language, facial expressions, gestures, written instructions, and interactive learning activities. These approaches can facilitate comprehension, increase learner engagement, and create a more inclusive English-language learning environment. The findings emphasize the importance of adapting instructional strategies to the individual linguistic and communicative needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing students rather than relying exclusively on conventional auditory-based methods.

Keywords

deaf learners, hard-of-hearing students, English language learning, inclusive education, visual aids, sign language, teaching strategies

Introduction

The teaching and learning of English as a foreign language (EFL) among deaf and hard-of-hearing (D/HH) students has received increasing attention within the field of inclusive and special-needs education. Although D/HH learners are capable of developing

English language proficiency, their learning experiences may differ considerably from those of hearing students because of differences in access to auditory input, communication practices, and educational support. In particular, listening comprehension, pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition, reading, and classroom interaction may present distinctive challenges when English instruction relies predominantly on spoken language. Research has consequently emphasized the importance of adapting language instruction to learners' visual, linguistic, and communicative needs.

Previous studies demonstrate that visual and multimodal approaches can provide meaningful support for deaf learners. For example, Birinci and Sarıçoban investigated 80 deaf students learning English as a foreign language and found that vocabulary instruction combining visual materials with sign language produced stronger learning and retention outcomes than sign-language instruction without visual materials. Similarly, research on multimedia-supported reading has shown that deaf students make use of pictures, sign-language videos, and concept maps during reading activities, although learners may require explicit instruction in how to process visual information strategically. These findings indicate that simply providing visual materials may not be sufficient; teachers also need to develop students' visual literacy and integrate visual resources purposefully into language instruction [1].

Other research has explored the role of sign language, written support, and multimodal communication in classroom learning. Marschark, for instance, examined sign-language interpreting and real-time text as forms of classroom support and found that their effectiveness varied according to the learning context and instructional conditions. In addition, Berent demonstrated that visual enhancement of written English could support the development and long-term retention of grammatical knowledge among deaf college students. Such findings suggest that English instruction for D/HH learners should extend beyond conventional auditory-based approaches and incorporate appropriately designed visual and written input.

Accordingly, this study seeks to address five interconnected questions: (1) How can deaf learners develop their English language skills more effectively? (2) What are the

principal challenges they encounter when learning English? (3) Which teaching methods and learning environments can support their English language development? (4) How can teachers, peers, and family members contribute to an effective and inclusive learning environment? and (5) What strategies can be developed to address existing challenges and improve English language learning outcomes among deaf learners? The overall aim is to identify major barriers to English language learning among D/HH students and to examine inclusive, learner-centered approaches that can provide more accessible and supportive opportunities for English language development [2].

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative classroom-based research design to investigate the challenges experienced by deaf and hard-of-hearing students in learning English and to explore teaching practices that can facilitate their language development. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on learners' experiences, perceptions, communication needs, classroom participation, and responses to different instructional techniques rather than relying exclusively on numerical measures of achievement [3]. The research adopts an inclusive and learner-centered perspective, viewing deaf learners as active participants in the learning process and recognizing that their linguistic and educational needs may differ according to their communication preferences, previous educational experiences, degree of hearing loss, use of hearing aids or cochlear implants, and familiarity with sign language.

The study focuses particularly on difficulties related to vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, pronunciation, reading, classroom interaction, communication, and following verbal instructions. It also examines the extent to which visual and multimodal resources, including pictures, written instructions, videos, subtitles, gestures, facial expressions, sign language, demonstrations, real objects, and digital learning materials, can support learners' comprehension and participation. These areas are important because deaf and hard-of-hearing learners may have limited access to auditory information, while conventional foreign-language teaching frequently depends on listening and spoken communication [4]. Previous international research has demonstrated that visual and sign-supported approaches can provide meaningful

assistance in vocabulary learning, reading comprehension, grammatical development, and classroom participation. Research conducted in Central Asia has also highlighted the challenges faced by English teachers when adapting instructional methods to deaf and hard-of-hearing learners, particularly when teachers have limited specialized training and access to appropriate teaching resources [5].

Results

The findings indicate that deaf and hard-of-hearing learners can benefit substantially from teaching approaches that provide visual, tactile, kinaesthetic, and interactive forms of language input. Classroom observations suggest that learners demonstrate greater engagement and comprehension when English vocabulary and concepts are presented through pictures, written words, demonstrations, gestures, facial expressions, and real objects rather than through spoken explanations alone. Visual materials appear to be particularly useful for introducing and reinforcing new vocabulary because they allow students to associate English words with concrete meanings without depending exclusively on auditory information.

The results further demonstrate the potential value of captioned videos, visual storytelling, subtitles, interactive digital resources, and demonstrations. These resources can increase students' access to English input while also making lessons more engaging and participatory. Students appear to respond positively when information is presented through more than one mode, particularly when written language is combined with visual representation and physical demonstration. Such multimodal instruction can also provide opportunities for learners to review information repeatedly and at their own pace [6].

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that deaf and hard-of-hearing learners may experience particular challenges when learning English through predominantly auditory-based instruction. At the same time, the results suggest that the use of visual, tactile, kinesthetic, and interactive approaches can provide greater access to English-language input and facilitate learners' participation in classroom activities. These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that deaf learners can benefit from

instructional approaches that provide linguistic information through multiple accessible modes [7].

One of the most important findings is the value of visual materials in English-language learning. Pictures, written words, flashcards, demonstrations, captioned videos, and visual storytelling were found to provide learners with additional opportunities to understand and retain new vocabulary. This finding is consistent with research by Birinci and Sarıçoban, who examined sign-language-supported vocabulary teaching among deaf students and reported positive effects of combining visual materials with sign language [8]. The present findings similarly suggest that visual representation can help learners establish a clearer connection between an English word and its meaning, particularly when the target vocabulary represents concrete objects, actions, or concepts.

Conclusion

The study concludes that deaf and hard-of-hearing learners are capable of developing their English language skills effectively when instruction is adapted to their individual communication and learning needs. The findings indicate that difficulties with listening, pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition, classroom communication, and understanding verbal instructions can create significant barriers when English lessons rely primarily on auditory input. However, these challenges can be reduced through accessible and learner-centered teaching practices.

In the context of Uzbekistan, further research and professional development are needed to strengthen English-language education for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Providing teachers with appropriate methodological training, accessible materials, visual and digital resources, and practical guidance can contribute to more inclusive language classrooms. Overall, the study demonstrates that moving from predominantly auditory instruction towards a multimodal and learner-centered approach can create greater opportunities for deaf learners to participate in English-language learning and develop their linguistic abilities.

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