

READING PEDAGOGY IN EFL CLASSES FOR STUDENTS WITH ALBINISM: A CASE STUDY

Dossou Flavien LANMANTCHION

Université Nationale des Sciences, Technologies,
Ingénierie Et Mathématiques (UNSTIM) Benin Republic

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-0928-5183

flavienlam81@yahoo.fr

Abstract: Benin Republic encounters socio economic challenges that impact access to education for all children, particularly, those with disabilities like albinism. This paper looked into the practices of teachers in reading and perceptions of students with albinism in English language classes in the Republic of Benin. The study explores the gaps that need to be addressed for students with albinism to better reach their potential in reading. To reach this purpose, data were collected mainly through unstructured interviews to 10 participant teachers who have once taught students with albinism and a uniform questionnaire to fifty-six (56) students with albinism. The study has revealed a lack of a specified special education curriculum and adapted reading materials, inadequate training system, teachers' comfort levels and beliefs, selection of appropriate reading texts and designing tasks for teaching reading and non-adapted reading assessment. The researcher suggests an adapted curriculum and a series of training sessions for EFL teachers to enhance reading instructional practices for students with albinism and actually increase teachers' comfort levels against students with albinism.

Key Words: Albinism, Reading, English as a Foreign Language, instructional practices.

PÉDAGOGIE DE LA LECTURE DANS LES COURS D'ANGLAIS LANGUE ÉTRANGÈRE POUR LES ÉTUDIANTS ATTEINTS D'ALBINISME : UNE ÉTUDE DE CAS

Résumé : La République du Bénin est confrontée à des défis socio-économiques qui ont un impact sur l'accès à l'éducation pour tous les enfants, en particulier ceux qui souffrent de handicaps tels que l'albinisme. Cet article a examiné les pratiques des enseignants en matière de lecture et les perceptions des étudiants atteints d'albinisme dans les cours d'anglais en République du Bénin. L'étude explore les lacunes qui doivent être comblées pour que les élèves atteints d'albinisme puissent mieux atteindre leur potentiel en lecture. Pour atteindre cet objectif, les données ont été collectées principalement par le biais d'entretiens non structurés avec 10 enseignants participants qui ont déjà enseigné à des élèves atteints d'albinisme et un questionnaire uniforme à cinquante-six (56) élèves atteints d'albinisme. L'étude a révélé l'absence d'un programme d'enseignement spécifique et de matériel de lecture adapté, un système de formation inadéquat, les niveaux de confort et les croyances des enseignants, la sélection de textes de lecture appropriés et la conception de tâches pour l'enseignement de la lecture et l'évaluation de la lecture non adaptée. Le chercheur suggère un programme adapté et une série de sessions de formation pour les enseignants d'anglais langue étrangère afin d'améliorer les pratiques d'enseignement de la lecture pour les étudiants atteints d'albinisme et d'augmenter réellement les niveaux de confort des enseignants face aux étudiants atteints d'albinisme.

Mots-clés : Albinisme, lecture, anglais langue étrangère, pratiques pédagogiques.

Introduction

According to the Order on the Orientation of National Education in the Republic of Benin (2003 & 2005), the Beninese school curriculum is designed to prepare students to “reach their potential regardless of background, place, circumstance or abilities” (LOI n° 2003-17 du 11 novembre 2003 portant Orientation de l’Education Nationale en République du Bénin, rectifiée par la loi n° 2005-33 du 06 octobre 2005). However, students with special needs may require additional skills in order to reach their potential in school environment. People suffering from albinism have been the subject of public curiosity for many years, purported to have all sorts of supernatural powers such as mind reading and suspected of witchcraft (Morton, 2014). Equally, people with albinism are often victims of social discrimination and serious persecutions in a context where people still hold onto all kinds of beliefs and traditions. They face some misconceptions which discriminate and stigmatize them. One of these misconceptions posits albinism as a punishment from the gods (Morton, 2014). People with albinism are considered as curse by many people who sometimes refuse to talk to them. Besides visual problems and given the lack of pigment in their skin, these students with albinism risk severe skin damage if exposed to ultraviolet radiations. Children and young people with albinism are doubly vulnerable: they are visually impaired and their striking difference in appearance -looking “white”- in a black population makes them the target of bullying and name-calling. From birth till death, albinos have poor vision because of involuntary eye movements and difficulties in recognition of images. Students with learning albinism present an ongoing challenge as their reading achievement increasingly falls below their peers. Teachers have not had a standard curriculum for those kinds of students and students have received the same instruction as the other students. This demotivates them, causing their high- drop rates. Research into students with albinism challenges and improving access to English language learning in Beninese secondary schools is much needed. This study, which intends to support students with albinism in their academic endeavors, more specifically examines EFL instructors’ pedagogical practices to determine whether they meet the expectations of their learners with albinism, with regard to reading. It is structured around five points: the literature review; the objectives; the methodology; the results/discussion; and the conclusion.

2. The Literature Review

Although little is known about learners with albinism in English language teaching, there is a substantial knowledge base about learner profiles and individual differences on language learning tasks on the one hand, and the influence of different tasks on various types of learners on the other. Hollenbeck (2013), investigating reading comprehension practices employed with students who experience difficulties with learning, has explored a special education teachers’ beliefs and practices related to reading comprehension in particular. There is a complex interaction between participants’ beliefs, particularly the belief that their students’ reading difficulties were due to the complexity of the text as opposed to any potential limitations of their pedagogies or practices. Students who are affected with disabilities are tasked with accomplishing the same academic tasks as the nondisabled peers. Oyler, Obrzut and Asbjornsen (2012) have noted that students who experience reading difficulties performed significantly lower than peers in the mainstream. Studies have shown that teachers instructing students with special needs do not always feel comfortable and often do not push students to achieve their best. Teachers’ lack of understanding of students with special needs affected the instruction that was provided. Kolb and Jussim (1994) have noted

that teachers with low expectations of their students develop a learning environment that breeds under achievement. Brady and Woolfson (2008), meanwhile, explored the relationship between a teacher's role, self-efficacy, attitudes about special students, and teaching experience and training in relation to a teacher's understanding of the cause of students' difficulties. The level of comfort that teachers felt around students with special needs in general molded their attitudes about providing instruction to students affected by disabilities (Brady & Woolfson, 2008). Patinvoh Agbayahoun and Lanmantchion (2018) have reported a study into the classroom practices of a group of English instructors and the points of view of their students with vision impairments (VI) in an English department. They have listed a variety of challenges experienced by the participating students with vision impairments during their training. These challenges were mainly due to the lack of preparation of both the teaching and administrative staff. Teachers and the administration have a key role in the learners' success. Richards (2001) has pointed out that even if teaching materials are of poor quality, exceptional teachers can usually compensate for that. On the other hand, very well-designed teaching materials will not guarantee success in foreign language learning if the teachers lack qualifications, motivation, training, experience, and language proficiency. Foreign language teachers who work in an inclusive classroom may have additional problems due to lack of training and qualifications in working with special children. Teachers also need to be open-minded towards working in inclusive classrooms, and willing to adapt teaching materials and methods to meet the needs of students with difficulties (Sparks and Lovette, 2009). In an inclusive context, all students with special needs, regardless of the type and severity of their disability or difficulty, attend regular schools and they are under the responsibility of teachers (Vaughn, et al. 2005). Furthermore, it is the teacher's responsibility to address weakness areas of students with disabilities and difficulties by making instructional and content modifications, and in some cases, to take part in identification of these students in class. Ganschow and Schneider (2006) have stated that training and education for foreign language teachers usually prepare them for the ideal learner who is expected to master language skills (pronunciation, reading, writing, speaking and listening) through exposure and practice. They point out the need for additional training in meeting the needs of students with special needs. Foreign language teachers should learn to determine the most beneficial adaptations for their students, and to identify students at risk of developing a foreign language learning disability as early as possible (Ganschow & Schneider, 2006).

3. Objectives of the Study

The overall objective of this study is to show the link between instructional practices and education for all. The study aims at using the following research questions: research Question 1: What were/are EFL teachers' experiences and perceptions teaching students with albinism to read? Research Question 2: What were/are the perceptions of learners with albinism about reading instructional practices in EFL classes?

4. Method

4.1 Participants

The target population was purposely sampled. Purposeful sampling cautions the researcher to select participants who fulfill a certain number of criteria (Creswell, 2007). The criteria for this study were: a) students with albinism in secondary education; b) EFL teachers who have taught learners with albinism. The selected participants consisted of

approximately 16 students with albinism and 10 EFL teachers. Table 1 provides more information on the participants' personal information: number of participants, age, sex and other details.

4.2 Instruments

A qualitative case study design was employed in order to obtain insight into EFL teachers' experiences and students' perceptions about reading instructions and to decipher the findings. The study's research questions were constructed on the premise that there were multiple perspectives to be uncovered. The data collection process for this study included procedures created to answer the research questions and achieve the purpose of the research. Data were collected from a questionnaire which was specifically designed in this study to obtain information from 16 albinos participants (11 males and 5 females). The participants are from different secondary schools. The goal was to investigate the existence of opinion patterns and to possibly identify specific patterns. The participant albinos' age range is from 10 to 38. The data were analyzed in order to identify patterns representing EFL students' opinions about reading instructional practices. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 EFL teachers to better gain understanding of the students' access to learning materials in reading. A total of 10 EFL teachers were selected. Most interviews took 30 to 60 minutes and questions related to the participant's background, reading materials, provisions for students with albinism in reading and evaluation of current reading instructional practices. A digital recorder was used to record each interview. The digital recorder enabled the researcher to upload the recordings to a transcription app, *TranscribeMe* that made it easier to transcribe it into text. After the transcriptions were created, each transcript was read several times to gain an insight into the information given by each participant.

5. Results and Discussion

The findings emergent from the data were identified using the same coding methods. The outcomes of the investigation are reported under two headings: (1) Reading instructional practices with students with albinism and perceptions of EFL Teachers; and (2) opinions of the participating albino learners about reading instructional practices.

5.1 Reading instructional practices with students with albinism and perceptions of EFL Teachers

-Lack of a specified special education curriculum and adapted reading materials

The first finding was lack of a specified special education curriculum. It is beneficial to expose students with special needs to a general education curriculum because it enables them to have expanded academic options, increases expectations of students, allows students to develop academic and social skills such as academic and social, and empowers them to work with their peers (Olson et al. 2016). However, participant teachers stated that there was no government-issued curriculum for special education regarding textbooks and other academic materials. Each participant EFL teacher found personal academic resources to use in his /her classroom. Locating the necessary resources presented a challenge to teachers, making it difficult for students with albinism to find support when needed. The lack of a special curriculum led to teaching disharmony as they used different resources. This situation generates various reading instruction pedagogies. Since there is no curriculum for students with albinism or a universal system to expose the students to, teachers then stick to

the standard curriculum. However that curriculum excludes materials and lessons for special learners, i.e. students with albinism.

-Lack of training for EFL Teachers in special education

The participants explained that there was also a lack of support from the government as there was little professional development focused directly on enhancing special education students' reading performance. Teachers need to be better equipped to instruct in diverse contexts and directly enhance student achievement (Gehrke and Cocchiarella, 2013). Many schools are facing a shortage of personnel with qualifications to even teach the mainstream whereas there is an increase in the learning population of these students each year. The teachers do not receive any initial training in managing special students before starting teaching them. The national professional development sessions that are supposed to be regularly held every year are not. As one of the participant teachers stated, a staggering number of teachers are in need of professional development to deal with all students. One of the participant teachers elaborated, "*I would have loved to have training and workshops on teaching reading to students with albinism— and work with a reading specialist, being trained could help me to know how to deal with such students.*" Ganschow and Schneider (2006) point out the need for additional training in meeting the needs of students with special needs.

-Low expectations from EFL Teachers and indifferent training staff

There was a general agreement that far less support and fewer services are available for students with albinism in developing their reading. The findings pointed to the fact that the majority of EFL teachers gave no special attention to students with albinism in the classroom, and they conducted their teaching without showing any necessarily care for them. The reading instructional practices used for the mainstream are the same used with students with albinism. Clearly, participant teachers seem to ignore students with albinism in the classroom through their pedagogical attitudes. (Begeny et al., 2008) investigated teachers' perceptions of students' reading abilities using a continuum of assessment methods. The data showed that teachers' perceptions were close to accurate in estimating students' abilities when students' oral reading fluency skills were strong. Teachers' opinions of students' academic abilities affected their thought process, instructional practices, and implementation of special education policies. Lyon and Weiser (2009) found that a teacher's knowledge and pedagogical instructional expertise were linked to students' reading achievement. They also noted that a teacher with low-quality pedagogy can produce devastating results, negatively influencing a student for years. A teachers' pedagogical quality helps to determine his or her effectiveness and is a vital component of student's academic growth (Ganschow and Schneider, 2006).

-EFL teachers comfort with students with albinism

The study has shown that most EFL teachers teaching reading to students with albinism do not always feel comfortable. Their lack of understanding of the needs of students with albinism needs affected the instruction that they provided. The level of comfort that EFL teachers felt around students with albinism in general molded their attitudes about providing instruction to the students. Teachers are not really prepared to help and support students with albinism. Worse, they even discriminate against students in class who are visibly 'different' in their classrooms. EFL teachers often limit their connection to students with

albinism because they think such students have strange skin and behaviors that they considered problematic. Some of the respondent teachers were even afraid to approach these students and indirectly shun them in the classroom. Instead of having a proper understanding of the situation and making the necessary teaching adjustments, the investigated EFL teachers simply ignored students with albinism. The teachers' negative perceptions affected these students because their value as students was not taken into account. Teachers' beliefs are influenced by their students' special education label which, in turn affects the instructional practices utilized in classrooms (Cook and Cameron, 2010).

-No adapted Reading Assessment

The other finding that emerged is the same reading assessment system for all students. During examinations, all students are given the same reading comprehension test and the same amount of time to answer the questions on the reading text. Students with albinism are not assessed based on their current situation and status. Squires (2012) noted that institutions that adopted textbooks where students spend a significant amount of time completing activities that are tested can have a significant effect on student achievement. The respondent teachers agreed that learners with albinism go through the same mode of reading assessment as the other students. This practice underscores the bias of the assessment system. One consequence of non-differentiation of assessment was that the students with albinism faced some challenges in terms of academic performance, as the teachers did not provide different types of assessment, including personalized-assessment, when they were evaluating the mainstream classes.

5.2 Opinions of the Participating Albinos Learners about Reading Instructional Practices

Many challenges and issues related to the teaching of reading have been identified based on the opinions of the participating students with albinism. While teaching reading, EFL teachers usually ask all students to read aloud in the class. However, students rarely understood the text given to them. Reading aloud has no relation to understanding. In fact, it makes it more difficult to understand the text as those doing the reading are focusing on how to pronounce the words. Jony one of the respondent albinos said

“I am not sure whether I was not up to the level or the difficulty level of the texts provided to me were beyond my comprehension. But in both cases, I had problem in making sense out of those texts, hence I did not like reading.”

And to Gael confessed

“I passed my school days without even knowing the necessity of reading English texts. I had neither any reason nor any interest to read those difficult and boring texts.”

According to participant students with albinism, EFL teachers usually come in the class without any preparation on the content. They do not care whether the text is appropriate to the learners with albinism or not. Moreover, they hardly give any importance to language teaching and language learners and their interest. There is hardly ever any special task for students with albinism except memorizing word meaning and question answers. In most cases, the EFL teacher explains the words for all students and later they remember them for test. Students with albinism choose neither to read nor to engage in other tasks involving reading. Most of the participant students with albinism think that it is the teacher who improves his/her English but not the learners. Teachers seem unaware about the fact that reading is for students. They practice reading in the classroom and develop their reading

proficiency instead of letting students enhance their reading skills. Moreover, EFL teachers teach reading simply because it is included in the textbook and is going to be tested in examination. The main aim of teaching reading text is to help students in securing a good score in examinations.

Conclusion

This investigation is an inquiry into reading instructional practices and perceptions of students with albinism in EFL classes in the Republic of Benin. There are many issues and challenges in teaching reading to students with albinism in EFL classroom: lack of a specified special education curriculum and adapted reading materials, inadequate training system, teaching staff beliefs, non-adapted reading assessment, selection of appropriate reading texts and designing tasks for teaching reading. More effective strategies are needed to teach such specific students. Apart from being well-educated, qualified, motivated, experienced, and proficient, foreign language teachers also need to be trained to work in an inclusive classroom. Future researches could focus on all students with special needs of which students with albinism are a sub-group: the relation between students with albinism and other special learning difficulties.

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