Teaching English to visually impaired learners in Türkiye – Experiences of EFL instructors in higher education

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Abstract

"There are always two sides to every story," as noted by the American philosopher Jonathan Edwards. It is, therefore, crucial to consider the perspectives of both parties, especially when dealing with a complex phenomenon. In the context of this research, that perspective involves the EFL instructors who taught visually impaired learners. Due to insufficient preparation stemming from a lack of adequate background knowledge on how to engage with individuals with visual impairments and what considerations are necessary when teaching them EFL, it is unsurprising that instructors have encountered difficulties in instructing visually impaired learners. This study investigated the overall experiences of the EFL instructors who taught visually impaired learners, challenges they faced and accommodations and assistive strategies they used. The participants consisted of four EFL instructors working at higher education institutions in Türkiye. The data were collected through an observation of a class hour of one of the instructors and semi-structured interviews with all participants. The findings revealed that the instructors felt anxious, emotional and were in self-doubt at the beginning, and gradually developed confidence and appreciation as a result of the experiences they gained through teaching, reading the relevant literature, and the continuous feedback they got from their learners. Instructors also implemented a number of strategies to deal with the challenges they faced. The study concluded with implications for language teaching and suggestions for further research.

Introduction

The practice of foreign language teaching has been around for thousands of years. The first documented descriptions of language teaching methods in Europe date back to the 5th century AD (Hilgendorf, 2025). However, the earliest focus on teaching foreign languages to visually impaired learners came almost a century ago. Morrissey (1931), a teacher who was also visually impaired, published his work, "Teaching Foreign Languages in Schools for the Blind", marking the first written resource dedicated to

providing foreign language education for visually impaired individuals. This work also encouraged educators to acknowledge the presence of visually impaired learners in language classrooms (Jedynak, 2018). From this, it can be inferred that scholarly attention to foreign language education for the visually impaired has existed for only about a century. Thus, the past hundred years can be seen as a transitional period during which individuals, academics, and educators began to explore methods and solutions for teaching foreign languages to visually impaired students. However, the field has not captured the attention of many researchers from the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) society. Consequently, it is likely that many instructors worldwide find themselves having to learn how to teach visually impaired learners only when faced with the need to do so, often without any prior training, knowledge, or experience. A study revealed that EFL instructors working with visually impaired students in Türkiye tended to use the same methods and materials designed for sighted learners, despite research highlighting the distinct needs of visually impaired individuals. Instructors encountered several difficulties but continued with familiar approaches, mainly due to their lack of formal training in teaching English to students with visual impairments (Başaran, 2012). This lack of preparation can pose challenges for both instructors and learners, as evidenced by numerous examples documented in the literature globally.

As of 2024, seventy-five English Language Teaching (ELT) departments operate in both state and private universities across Turkey. Prior to the 2018-2019 academic year, these departments did not include any courses specifically addressing Special Educational Needs (SEN) training focused on teaching visually impaired learners or SEN in general within their curricula. During the 2018-2019 academic year, some changes were implemented in ELT programs at the undergraduate level nationwide, and courses on SEN training were introduced into the updated curriculum. These courses are offered by the Department of Educational Sciences and are intended for all teaching programs collectively rather than being tailored specifically for ELT. In other words, the courses provide general knowledge about students with SEN, leaving instructors from different disciplines responsible for adapting the content to suit their own fields. Consequently, it is possible that many EFL instructors, if they have received any, rely on the general SEN training provided within the scope of Educational Sciences, which might leave instructors puzzled.

Support for EFL instructors working with visually impaired learners appears to be limited not only in formal education settings but also in terms of professional development opportunities. Although instructors can attend seminars and conferences to follow current trends and enhance their skills, training programs specifically designed for teaching English to students with visual impairments are still lacking. One contributing factor may be that SEN is not a primary focus in most EFL teacher training programs, and professionals with expertise in this area are relatively few.

In-service training opportunities addressing the needs of students with SEN are also limited in many institutions. When such training is offered, it often covers general aspects of SEN rather than focusing on the particular strategies and adaptations required for visually impaired learners in English language classrooms. This situation can make it more challenging for EFL instructors to adjust their instruction to support all learners effectively.

As of 2020, 8317 visually impaired learners are registered to tertiary level education programs in Türkiye (yok.gov.tr, 2020). ELT curricula in Türkiye included courses for inclusive practices for students with SEN only after 2018. Considering the recent changes, it is possible to say that there might not be a considerable number of instructors who have received formal training on inclusive practices for the visually impaired learners. In this case, a particular question arises:

-What strategies do the EFL instructors without any formal training on SEN follow in their classes to teach visually impaired learners?

Review of Literature

SEN in the context of EFL remains an under-researched area. Adding to the complexity, there is a disconnect between fields: SEN specialists focusing on teaching visually impaired learners often lack expertise in teaching English, while English instructors are typically untrained in working with visually impaired students. This can create challenges in providing foreign language education for visually impaired learners that are not as prevalent for sighted learners. Monthei (2013) highlights a key challenge faced by blind immigrants and refugees learning English: their English teachers, while skilled in language instruction, often lack training in Braille or in working with visually impaired learners. On the other hand, Braille instructors typically do not have the

expertise to teach English as a second language. Another recent study provides a relevant example where two English instructors, one of whom specialized in ELT and the other in SEN, experienced challenges in addressing the needs of the visually impaired students effectively (Febtiningsih et al., 2021). This illustrates the need for cross-disciplinary expertise to address this gap efficiently.

For most instructors, meeting visually impaired students in their classrooms was their first exposure to such learners (Durna, 2012). A lack of sufficient awareness and uncertainty about how to interact with visually impaired learners may contribute to a slower learning process and outcomes that do not fully reflect students' potential. It is possible that when educators are unsure of how to adapt their teaching methods or communicate effectively, the overall learning experience becomes less productive. This possibility has been suggested in various studies, which point to the importance of targeted training and support in improving educational outcomes for students with visual impairments. In a study by Topor and Rosenblum (2013) involving 66 instructors of English to students with visual impairments, 30% of participants reported feeling inadequately prepared to teach these learners. Similarly, Hernandez Giraldo et al., (2018) observed, after conducting research with a blind learner in a public school, that English instructors are generally unprepared to teach visually impaired students due to insufficient training in the field. A study by Susanto and Nanda (2018) revealed that many instructors lack knowledge about SEN and have a limited understanding of visual impairments. A study at a university in El Salvador, revealed the English instructors did not receive any training to teach EFL to visually impaired students (Alvarenga de Alas et al., 2020). A recent auto-ethno-biographical study highlights the challenges faced by EFL instructors teaching blind students which include inadequate institutional support, limited professional preparation for teaching students with visual impairments, and a lack of familiarity with Braille and inclusive instructional design (Villalba, 2022).

In terms of foreign language education, visual impairment can be a major cause of a number of challenges due to the nature of foreign language teaching, particularly the dependency on visuals. An explanation for this important aspect of language teaching is provided below:

"A key feature of language teaching is that while in other courses communication is used to teach the course content, in foreign languages content is used to teach communication. The non-verbal methods of communication are key players in the teaching of meaning, while in most classes where languages are taught, vision plays a dominant if not an exclusive role". (Christidou, 2016, p. 216)

The reliance on visual aids to create context and convey information in language classes may present challenges for visually impaired learners. Research highlights the significant role of vision in understanding and interacting with the world, with studies indicating that sighted children acquire approximately 80% of their curriculum through visual means which highlights the importance of equipping visually impaired students with compensatory skills, such as tactile methods, to navigate and engage with their environment as effectively as their sighted peers (BLENNZ, 2015). A study involving 32 visually impaired students and 12 EFL instructors identified the inability to use visual aids or environmental cues as one of the challenges listed for teaching visually impaired learners (Lovi, 2013). This dependency can create a disadvantage for visually impaired EFL learners compared to their sighted peers. Thus, there is a pressing need to develop alternative teaching materials and strategies that can effectively replace visuals in a meaningful way.

In SEN terminology, "accommodation" refers to a broad range of strategies, techniques, methods, and adaptations designed to meet the needs of individuals requiring specific arrangements to accomplish a task. These adjustments may involve modifying the content, style, or timing of a task—or, in some cases, eliminating the task altogether. A simple example can illustrate the concept. Imagine a visually impaired student participating in a language class with sighted peers. If the teacher displays a picture of a family eating together to stimulate speaking practice, they might describe the image aloud. This includes mentioning visual details like the people's clothing, their ages or physical appearances, and items in the environment such as wall decorations. This adaptation transforms the visual material into an accessible format for the visually impaired learner. In a study, visually impaired learners evaluated the methods and materials used in their English classes and emphasized the importance of individualized accommodations tailored to the needs of visually impaired learners, noting that a one-

size-fits-all solution does not exist, as each learner's requirements vary, much like individual responses to medical treatments (Şimşek, 2021). The degree of visual impairment can influence how learners acquire and practice language skills. For instance, partially sighted students might use large-print materials, while those with total vision loss require tactile or auditory alternatives. Even partially sighted students may sometimes prefer audio-tactile options if they find long texts challenging to read.

All students respond positively to personalized care and support from their instructors, as feeling acknowledged and valued enhances motivation and helps them reach their full potential. For visually impaired learners, such efforts can make a significant impact. It is not uncommon to encounter EFL instructors who genuinely strive to empathize with the challenges faced by visually impaired learners and try to adapt their teaching strategies accordingly. In fact, most instructors express positive attitudes toward having visually impaired students in their classes (Omer, 2015). Similarly, visually impaired learners have shared positive experiences with instructors who demonstrate understanding and employ appropriate teaching methods and accommodations tailored to their needs (Attachoo & Sittihikul, 2021). However, an opposite scenario is also possible. A study conducted in Indonesia at a high school for visually impaired learners, involving two English instructors, listed teaching writing as challenging, together with a lack of teaching resources and strategies and insufficient teacher qualifications (Febtiningsih et al., 2021). In such cases, visually impaired learners seem to be dependent on their instructors' willingness to make instructional, material, and assessment accommodations.

Methodology

Research Design

The study was planned and conducted as a qualitative multiple case study. The study also followed a narrative design, and semi-structured retrospective interviews were conducted with the instructors during which the instructors shared their memories and experiences. Although the term "narrative" is often associated with fictional works like novels or non-fictional accounts such as memoirs and biographies, it also appears in non-literary contexts within social sciences, including psychology, sociology, history, linguistics, sociolinguistics, and education. In educational research, narrative research

is defined as "the description and re-storying of the narrative structure of varieties of educational experience". (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989 p. 4) This approach focuses on individuals and their personal experiences, providing insights into the story itself (Creswell, 2012, p. 502). Essentially, in narrative inquiry, researchers aim to understand and reflect on a problem through the first-person accounts of those who have experienced the phenomenon being studied. Riessman (2008, p.15) further summarizes that "interview participants tell stories, investigators construct stories from their data." The following questions were addressed in this study.

1. What are the general experiences of the EFL instructors who teach learners with visual impairments in Türkiye?
2. What are the challenges faced by EFL instructors while teaching EFL to students with visual impairments?
3. What are the adaptive strategies, methods, techniques, and materials provided by EFL instructors while teaching EFL to students with visual impairments?

Participants

The participants of this study are visually impaired learners who began learning English as a foreign language in elementary school and have continued their education at state and private universities in Türkiye. In addition to student participants, interviews were conducted with the parents of one student, four English language instructors with experience teaching visually impaired learners, and an expert in the field. These additional interviews aimed to deepen understanding and support the credibility of the students' accounts. While the study includes multiple participant groups, it mainly focuses on the experiences of the four teacher participants. All participant names used in this article are pseudonyms selected by the individuals themselves. The student participants include Eylül, Bahar, Almila, Nil, and Yasemin, while the teacher participants are Murat, Leyla, Maya, and Neva. Among the instructors, Murat and Leyla taught Eylül, whereas Maya and Neva worked with Almila. For this reason, the article primarily centers on the experiences of these four instructors and two students, providing insight into English language teaching practices for learners with visual

impairments at the university level. Detailed profiles of students and instructors are presented in Tables 1 and 2 below:

Table 1.

Participant Information Related to the Instructors

Name (Pseudonym)	Education Level	Teaching Experience	SEN Training	Experience with Visually Impaired Learners
Leyla	MA in ELT	7 years	• No formal SEN training, • attended several seminars on SEN	• Taught Eylül in multiple courses
Murat	MA in Linguistics (Ongoing)	8 years	• No formal SEN training	• Taught Eylül at both prep and departmental levels • prepared exams for Eylül
Maya	MA in ELT	6 years	• No formal SEN training, • Did voluntary work for visually impaired learners	• Taught Almila online • invigilated during Almila's exams
Neva	MA in ELT	2 years	• No formal SEN training	• Taught Almila • invigilated during Almila's exams

As can be seen in Table 1, the participants all had MA in ELT and had various teaching experiences ranging from 2 to 8 years.

Table 2.

Participant Information Related to the Students

Name (Pseudonym)	Current Education Level & Department	Visual Impairment Status	English Learning Background
Eylül	• Junior undergraduate student • Department of Psychology (30% English curriculum), • Private university	• Total visual impairment due to premature birth complications	• Started learning English in 4th grade; continued through high school • Attended one-year English prep school before starting department • Completed General English and ESP courses at her department
Almila	• Junior undergraduate student • Department of Law (30% English curriculum) • Private university	• Born with nyctalopia (night-blindness) • Near blindness (10% vision)	• Started learning English in 4th grade; continued through high school • Attended one-year English prep school before starting department • Currently taking courses for Academic English offered by her university

Data Collection

In this study, semi-structured interviews were used to balance control over data collection with flexibility, allowing participants to share their memories freely. Interview forms were created as a framework, with broad questions to encourage open sharing, and specific follow-up questions would be posed if necessary. Participants were not given the interview questions in advance to maintain the authenticity of their responses. The interviews with students were conducted in Turkish and the interviews with instructors were conducted in English, with an option to switch to Turkish, and held online for flexibility and to accommodate participants in different locations. Three 60-minute interviews were held with each student, focusing on their EFL learning experiences, challenges, and coping strategies during elementary school, high school, and university education. One 60-minute interview was held with each instructor focusing on their experience, challenges, and adaptive strategies regarding teaching EFL to visually impaired students. Additionally, a 50-minute lecture observation of one of the instructors' (Neva) classes, at which one of the student participants (Almila) was enrolled, was included to verify and enhance the credibility of the interview data. The focus was not on evaluating teaching but on observing how accommodations for a visually impaired student were implemented and the interactions between the student and teacher. A brief assessment of the classroom environment was also part of the observation, which was guided by a form prepared in advance. The instructor was informed of the observation and note-taking during the observation. The notes from the observation provided additional information and insight for data collection and analysis.

Data Analysis

This study was designed as a narrative inquiry, where the researchers re-constructed and re-negotiated participants' stories. In this approach, the researchers took a top-down perspective in narrative analysis, acting as a story analyst who aimed to present the experiences of visually impaired individuals from a holistic viewpoint. First, the interviews were transcribed. Next, the researchers conducted categorical content analysis, by dividing the data into smaller units, and categorizing the data according to recurring themes. These themes were compared, listed, and discussed in relation to the research questions and existing literature in the field. During the coding process, the

researchers first performed open coding, followed by axial coding. All the data analysis was conducted manually. Finally, the research questions served as chapter titles, with each chapter addressing a specific question, supported by the results of the coding process. To ensure the credibility of the data analysis, inter-rater reliability was assessed by having a third researcher independently code a portion of the interview transcripts. The codes generated were then compared to identify consistency in theme identification and interpretation. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus. This process helped enhance the reliability and validity of the thematic analysis. Finally, the data were analyzed using holistic content analysis, where participants' stories were retold as a whole, which was then presented in the findings section. Each participant's story was reported in dedicated chapters within the findings and discussion sections.

Researcher Positionality

The researchers did not teach the students taught by the participants in the study. However, one of the researchers was responsible for preparing accommodations for Eylül's English exams. As a result, one of the researchers approached the study from an emic perspective, drawing on personal, insider experience within the research context, while the other adopted an etic perspective, providing an external, more objective viewpoint. Both researchers are sighted and do not have a visually impaired family member or a relative.

Trustworthiness

The researchers aimed to create a triangulation through including multiple parties of the research phenomenon during the data collection process. Visually impaired students, parents of one of the visually impaired students taught by the participants, and an expert in teaching English to students with visual impairments were interviewed and consulted. In addition, the insight coming from the lesson observation also contributed to the triangulation of the data.

Findings and Discussion

Experiences of Instructors

While Leyla and Murat previously taught Eylül, Maya and Neva taught Almila. Except for Maya, this was their first experience teaching a visually impaired student. None of the instructors received formal training in teaching students with SEN, particularly those with visual impairments. These findings are consistent with those reported in previous studies, including those by Durna (2012), Monthei (2013), Topor and Rosenblum (2013), Hernandez Giraldo et al. (2018), Susanto and Nanda (2018), Alvarenga de Alas et al. (2020), Febtiningsih et al. (2021), and Villalba (2022).

Maya, however, had some experience working with visually impaired students during her undergraduate studies as part of a community service course. This course, though, did not focus on teaching English to visually impaired learners; instead, it involved helping them with school subjects, homework, and reading. Lacking formal training in SEN, the instructors sought to make up for this gap by researching information online about how to teach visually impaired learners. Over time, they felt that their experiences transformed them both personally and professionally as English instructors. Throughout their teaching experiences with visually impaired students, the instructors went through phases of mixed emotions and thoughts, especially when comparing their initial feelings at the beginning of the semester or year with how they felt afterward. Table 3 below illustrates the instructors' evolving thoughts and emotions regarding their experiences teaching English to visually impaired learners, highlighting the transition in their perspectives.

Table 3.

Changing Thoughts and Emotions of EFL Instructors Regarding their General Experiences with Teaching EFL to Visually Impaired Learners

	EFL Instructors			
	Leyla	**Maya**	**Neva**	**Murat**
Initial Thoughts & Emotions	• Getting emotional • Confusion • Hesitation • Anxiety	• Feeling of shock	• Expectation of a heavy workload • Hesitation • Anxiety • More responsibility	• Anxiety
Closing Thoughts & Emotions	• Appreciation • Confidence	• Appreciation • Confidence	• Confidence	• Appreciation • Motivated

Leyla often described herself as a sensitive and emotional person, attributing this to her exceptional ability to empathize with others. While she saw her emotional nature as both a strength and a weakness, it sometimes hindered her ability to focus on situations due to being overwhelmed by emotions. However, she also valued this trait for enabling her to understand and relate to others' perspectives, such as empathizing with Eylül's experiences as a visually impaired individual.

Leyla, The Interview.

"My weakness and my strength I think it's the same like I always like I'm an emotional person and I think that I really empathize with the people quickly…. I put my myself in her shoes and I always think that Uh, imagine myself that I can't see anything at the moment. How can I do it better? How can I like improve? We have a specific task? Right now, we have to do it and how can I, how could I do it if I cannot see anything at all….?"

Leyla's experience underscores the importance of empathy in supporting visually impaired learners. After a year with Eylül, she grew more confident, realizing her initial stress was due to lack of training. Leyla now feels better equipped for future visually impaired students and admires Eylül's superior listening and speaking skills.

Despite having no formal training, Maya often relied on prior experience with visually impaired learners. She figured out in the middle of the term that Almila, one of her students during the Covid-19 lockdown, was partially sighted. Maya had not been informed, and online classes with rarely used cameras made it difficult to identify Almila's condition. Even when cameras were on, Almila's glasses did not fit the stereotypical image of a learner with visual impairment. Maya later learned about Almila's condition from a colleague and attributed the delay to departmental oversight and Almila's reluctance to disclose her impairment, possibly due to peer concerns. Maya admitted that she primarily relied on her personal insight and experience as an EFL teacher who had previously worked with visually impaired learners. She openly stated that she did not make use of online resources, such as articles, videos, or supporting materials, related to SEN or visual impairment. Like Leyla, Maya emphasizes the importance of effective communication between EFL instructors and visually impaired students. She believes that fostering trust is crucial, though it may require time to develop. Consequently, she suggests that visually impaired students should remain with instructors they have established strong relationships with, rather than switching to new instructors each term.

Maya, The Interview

> *"It is also bad for student, by the way, because I am an experienced teacher with visually impaired students, and I can help them really well. Right? But if they change the teacher, it is hard to build the communication and rapport between teacher and student and also, they feel kind of teacher feels like ashamed of asking."*

Neva primarily taught EAP courses and first encountered Almila in one of these classes. Before teaching the class, she was informed that a visually impaired student would be present. Neva admitted that initially, she felt nervous and anxious, anticipating a heavy workload due to the adjustments she thought she would need to make for Almila. She assumed she would have to provide extra materials to accommodate Almila's needs, which she believed would add to her workload. However, she later realized that her concerns were unfounded. In her interviews, Neva shared that having a visually impaired student in her class made her feel a greater sense of responsibility.

She constantly aimed to ensure that she was doing everything possible to provide Almila with a high-quality education. In her interviews, Neva expressed feeling unsure about the language she used in the classroom. She explained that she made an effort to avoid words related to visual actions, such as "see."

Neva, The Interview

> *"I don't want to say anything wrong. For example, I am ignoring verb see. I am avoiding using it. Uh, for example, I'm trying not to say as you see, uh. What else? That's all, I guess. And actually, that's something our coordinator suggested to me at the very beginning of our course, because I asked her what I should do in this case because I also stated Uh, I had no uhm any, uh, I mean educational training related to this area and she stated that she uh she had read articles on this. So, she suggested me not to use see, I mean related any verbs related to seeing actually in general, so I don't know I'm doing right or wrong. Uh, because I don't want to behave offensively against Almila, and so I'm avoiding using it."*

Neva and her coordinator thought they were being considerate by avoiding the verb "see" with visually impaired learners. However, experts in SEN, especially those working with visually impaired individuals, suggest using such verbs without hesitation. Visually impaired people often use "see" in everyday language, like saying, "I didn't see your message." "Seeing" can mean reading, understanding, or being aware of something, not just the physical act of sight. Avoiding these verbs may inadvertently emphasize the disability instead of treating visually impaired individuals as equals.

Murat acknowledged that at the start, he was concerned due to his lack of training and experience in SEN, as well as his personal worries about how Eylül's nature as a visually impaired individual might impact their relationship during lessons.

Murat, The Interview

> *"Before meeting with her, I thought that it was going to be hard, you know? No, because I didn't have, uh, an experience like that. So, I thought that her personality will have a great effect on the way she learns from me because, uhm, if she was, how can I say it delicately? If she was an introvert, a sad person, a person that*

focuses on the hardships and bad aspects. And then I couldn't have done most of the things that we have achieved together.''

Although it is sometimes assumed within sighted communities that visual impairment may lead to sadness, many visually impaired individuals—particularly those who are born blind or who lose their vision at an early age—do not necessarily experience emotional distress as a direct result of their condition. Those who lose sight later may struggle more with their condition. In Eylül's case, Murat appreciated her lively personality and strong listening and speaking skills. Their mutual trust and communication helped build a positive relationship, and Eylül's enthusiasm for speaking activities motivated Murat to improve his lessons. As a result, it can be seen that instructors and learners mutually influence each other's motivation to engage more in English lessons. This dynamic is a key factor that shapes the overall experiences of both visually impaired learners and their instructors.

Challenges

The EFL instructors faced a variety of challenges while teaching English to visually impaired learners. The table below outlines the challenges that the instructors discussed in their interviews.

Table 4.

Challenges Faced by the Instructors of EFL while Teaching the Visually Impaired Learners

Challenges	*f*
Hesitation	3
Unpreparedness	2
Problems with time management	1
Lack of Braille materials	1
Time demanding	1
Long reading passages	1
Lack of knowledge & experience	1
Informing peers	1
Problems with LMS systems	1
Describing videos	1
Including abstract concepts in the lessons	1

The challenges faced by the EFL instructors varied from one to another, as the affective factors influencing these challenges were either personal or related to the institutions they worked at. In other words, each instructor experienced different challenges during their time teaching English to visually impaired students. There were only two common challenges mentioned by the two instructors: "hesitation" and "unpreparedness." Other challenges were mentioned by only one instructor in their interview.

Maya was unsure whether to include abstract concepts like colors in her lessons, recalling a time during her community service when vocabulary included colors. Her hesitation was understandable, as she had not been trained to teach visually impaired learners and felt guilty introducing unfamiliar concepts.

-Maya, The Interview

"When I give the colors, by the way, I felt kind of ashamed because like pink cars, the yellow blah blah, they're all maybe like abstract concepts for them, but I don't know. I just I was saying because there were such things there. I was depicting the visuals first, tried to make them more concrete or understandable, but they were talking about colors so maybe they could understand."

However, Maya's hesitation to include colors, while understandable, may not have been necessary. Visually impaired children learn colors through tactile materials, just as they learn abstract concepts like love, trust, or friendship. We may not touch love or smell trust, but we understand what they mean. Similarly, a visually impaired child can learn the colors of the rainbow or that the sky is blue.

Neva mentioned that balancing the pacing of the curriculum with providing accommodations for Almila was challenging. She often had to speed through lessons to stay on track with other classes, but after one lesson, Almila shared that the pace was too fast for her to keep up with. Neva's experience highlights a common challenge faced by many EFL instructors, who struggle with the heavy workload of the curriculum in their lessons.

Leyla shared that when Eylül was at the preparatory school, she did not have a Braille version of the coursebook. Although her parents attempted to convert the book

into Braille, they were unable to do so. As a result, Eylül had to use the regular print version of the book with her parents' assistance. Even if she had had the Braille version, Eylül struggled with spelling in English, which would have created another challenge in using the book. In her interview, Leyla mentioned that the Learning Management System (LMS) of the coursebook was not helpful for Eylül. Many of the activities and assignments, such as matching and dragging items to answer questions, were not suitable for her. Additionally, it was unclear whether the remaining activities were compatible with screen-reading technology. This highlights a critique of large publishing companies for not providing accessible formats for both sighted and visually impaired learners.

Maya shared another challenge she faced in her lessons, which was describing videos. While describing static images like pictures and illustrations was manageable, she found it much harder to describe videos.

Maya, The Interview

> *"One second, videos could be a challenge. OK, because pictures you can depict them but videos. You should stop them. We should at the time interrupt others, like maybe understanding that. That was a little bit challenging."*

This challenge highlights accessibility issues within major publishing houses. Visually impaired individuals can follow videos by listening to descriptions of the setting and actions. However, describing the video while it is playing in a classroom with sighted students can be disruptive. Publishing houses should provide video descriptions as an option, allowing visually impaired students to watch the video on their computers with headphones during lessons. Modern technology offers simple solutions for such issues, but large publishing houses have yet to prioritize making their resources more accessible.

Almila is partially sighted and was able to read until high school, but her vision deteriorated after that. For longer texts, she cannot rely on larger print or glasses. Since Almila does not know Braille, she requires a reader. Neva mentioned that reading aloud during their classes took much longer than she had anticipated. In Neva's case, Almila could be encouraged to use a screen reader for independent reading. However, many visually impaired individuals don't prefer screen reading technology due to its robotic,

mechanical voice. In this situation, audio recordings of the reading materials could be provided by support units instead. Similarly, Maya mentioned that during online education, she faced difficulty with reading long passages aloud from the book.

Maya, The Interview

> *"And also, the long passages. If they're too long. I was actually reading them a lot because I you know, although I make that, made them bigger in the screen, I thought that maybe it could be helpful. So, I was also teaching. Reading, uh, that was kind of challenging, but other than that they were all fine."*

In Maya's case, it is clear that the coursebook they used lacked audio versions of the reading texts, which would have been beneficial for both her and Almila. This highlights a flaw in the approach of large publishing houses, which fail to make their products more accessible.

Murat explained that most of the course content covered topics familiar to both sighted and visually impaired communities. However, he found some abstract concepts in certain units challenging, as he was unsure how to help Eylül clearly grasp these ideas.

Murat, The Interview

> *"Let's say if we had 10 or 12 units uh during that term, face to face term uhm, I think only one or two units were problematic for me because I had a bit of a hard time to try to make her visualize what we are talking about in her mind, but on topics like going on a holiday, or even going to a festival or sports, she had a lot of experiences and she was really talkative about her experiences, so I didn't have any problems."*

Despite his concerns about how to realistically represent abstract concepts, Murat did not let them stop him. He made efforts to find solutions and ultimately chose to discuss those topics with Eylül in class, which proved to be the right approach.

Accommodations, Adaptive Strategies, Methods, Techniques, and Materials

The EFL instructors employed various adaptive strategies, methods, techniques, and materials to address the challenges they encountered while teaching English to visually

impaired learners. The table below outlines these items based on how often they were mentioned by the instructors in their interviews.

Table 5.

Adaptive Strategies, Methods, Techniques, and Materials Provided by EFL Instructors While Teaching the Visually Impaired Learners

Adaptive Strategies, Methods, Techniques, and Materials	ƒ
Describing visuals	4
Getting peers to assist	3
Providing repetitions	1
Taking a photo of the board	1
Changing the seating arrangement	1
Providing materials prior to classes	1
Providing detailed instructions	1
Slowing down	1
Excluding from skills	1
Checking on the student	1
Zooming content	1
Using a clear & audible voice	1

The most common accommodations provided by the EFL instructors for their visually impaired learners included describing visuals and seeking assistance from peers. Additionally, the instructors adapted their lessons and strategies to meet the specific needs of their visually impaired students. The instructors most frequently described visual content to their visually impaired students during lessons. All of the instructors reported regularly describing photos, images, and similar materials. Sometimes these descriptions were given while teaching the entire class or introducing a topic, while at other times, descriptions were provided after sighted students had been given time to complete tasks.

EFL instructors frequently received help from other students when teaching visually impaired learners. Leyla, Maya, and Neva typically asked Eylül's and Almila's desk mates to assist with task instructions and visual descriptions. In contrast, Murat mentioned that although he did not specifically assign a deskmate to help Eylül, her friend took the initiative to assist her. Leyla used group work in reading activities to give Eylül a group of friends who could assist her with the text. Similarly, Neva often incorporated pair work in her lessons rather than individual tasks. Even when students

worked independently, Neva would have one of Almila's peers help her, particularly with reading and writing activities.

Pair and group work activities are highly recommended in language classrooms because they promote collaboration, cooperation, and give students opportunities to communicate while practicing the language. In classrooms with visually impaired learners, these activities are even more beneficial, as they not only offer the same advantages but also provide meaningful peer assistance to the visually impaired students. Visually impaired learners, particularly those who rely on oral accommodations, often need to hear task instructions, descriptions, or questions. Maya mentioned that she would provide Almila with repetitions whenever she requested them. This supportive approach is important because visually impaired learners may sometimes feel hesitant to ask for repetition. Instructors should not always wait for students to ask but should take the initiative to offer repetitions when necessary.

Leyla mentioned that after each lesson, she asked her students to take a photo of the board and share it on the class's WhatsApp group. This allowed Eylül's parents to download the photo later and help Eylül review the lesson notes. Eylül did not request her teacher to read the board aloud during lessons, as she preferred not to take notes while listening to the teacher. As a solution, Leyla came up with the idea of having students take photos of whatever was on the board.

Leyla, The Interview

"And again, as she couldn't see the board. I told the other students to take the photograph of the board and send the photographs on the WhatsApp group and in the evening there, her parents uh, like again were telling her what I wrote on the board if I wrote some vocabulary items or something, her parents were telling her mm-hmm to write down all the vocabulary items to her notebook."

Leyla's approach can be particularly useful when lesson time is limited or when instructors must follow a demanding curriculum. In her interview, Leyla also noted that she occasionally adjusted the seating arrangement to ensure that Eylül always had a peer sitting next to her to work with. Over time, students may feel tired if they are the ones consistently helping. To prevent both sighted and visually impaired students from

feeling uncomfortable when asking for or providing assistance, regularly changing the seating arrangement can be beneficial.

Neva shared that she sent Almila the lesson materials for the academic writing class via email before the lessons. Almila's vision had deteriorated during high school, and while she could once follow lessons with larger print, she now finds it tiring and time-consuming to read long texts this way. Although she can still use larger print and zoom, Neva does not provide materials in that format. Instead, she emails the documents to Almila so she can use her screen reader to access them before class. This approach was also evident during the lesson observation. However, during the lesson observation, it was noted that Almila did not use a screen reader to study the academic letter document but instead worked on it with one of her assigned groupmates.

In his interview, Murat frequently emphasized the importance of giving clear, detailed instructions for tasks. Even after noticing that one of Eylül's classmates was assisting her with task details, Murat continued to provide instructions before each activity. This was the right approach because, regardless of peer assistance, teacher guidance remains crucial for a student's performance. Additionally, peers may sometimes misinterpret the instructions and unintentionally mislead visually impaired learners. Therefore, Murat chose not to rely solely on Eylül's peer for accommodations, even though the student often volunteered to help.

The fast pace of a demanding curriculum can be a challenge for visually impaired learners. In such environments, instructors often need to move quickly to keep up with the schedule and avoid falling behind. Neva noted that Almila once gave her feedback about the fast pace of the class, prompting Neva to adjust the sequence of activities in an attempt to address the issue.

Neva, The Interview

"After that conversation I try to you know slow down. Actually, maybe doing the exercises mostly on Wednesdays and then leaving less exercise on Saturdays because you know, as the number of exercises increase."

Neva's case highlights the importance of the feedback instructors receive from their visually impaired students when addressing such challenges. Therefore, it is crucial

for instructors and students to establish a routine where they regularly exchange feedback regarding their needs.

Eylül faced challenges with spelling English words, which affected her performance in writing classes. Leyla, her writing instructor, shared that she overlooked Eylül's spelling errors and did not deduct points for them.

Leyla, The Interview

> *"I didn't think that this is a need for her (in her department) and therefore I tried not to, uh, cut some points because of spelling."*

However, Leyla's approach might not have been entirely correct. Eylül may need to improve her spelling skills, especially since 30% of her department's curriculum is taught in English, and she may be expected to read and write in English. Additionally, as Eylül aspires to become an academic, spelling will be important when writing articles. While Eylül could use a dictation software, it would be challenging for her to verify if the software transcribes the words correctly. Moreover, Eylül should develop her spelling skills to avoid relying solely on exam assistants for writing. Excluding spelling instruction may not be beneficial in the long term. Instead, extracurricular spelling practice could be assigned as homework, or Eylül could receive private spelling training after class from one of her instructors.

Neva explained that she frequently checked in with Almila to ensure she was able to follow the lessons comfortably. This illustrates the value of immediate feedback from students, which is particularly crucial for visually impaired learners. These learners are more sensitive to factors such as light, noise, or rapid pacing, which can impact their learning experience more intensely than their sighted peers. Asking visually impaired students for prompt feedback during lessons can help instructors make necessary adjustments and accommodations more effectively.

Maya shared that during online lessons, she used screen sharing to allow students to follow along with the book. Knowing Almila was partially sighted, Maya often zoomed in on the content to help her, and when that was not enough, she worked with Almila in a separate room, reading aloud while the other students worked. This approach highlights how online tools enabled Maya to support visually impaired learners privately

while managing the rest of the class. Online meeting platforms offer valuable flexibility for instructors and can help address challenges like fast pacing by providing optional revision sessions. For visually impaired learners, this support is crucial, especially when study partners are not provided by support units.

During the lesson observation, it was noted that Neva used a clear, audible voice while teaching. She also made sure to stay close to Almila throughout the lesson. Although Neva typically moved around the classroom while teaching, she avoided going to the back, likely to ensure Almila could always hear her. This thoughtful approach helped Almila follow the lesson more easily, while also ensuring that other students could hear the teacher clearly, even from the back of the classroom.

These findings align with those of Omer (2015) and Attachoo and Sittihikul (2021), who also observed that teachers tend to hold positive attitudes toward visually impaired learners and make efforts to provide personalized accommodations to support their learning needs.

Implications for Teaching

The findings of the study suggest several important implications for improving EFL instruction for visually impaired learners. One of the most critical issues was the lack of formal training and coursework on SEN in ELT programs in Türkiye, which led instructors to face various challenges in the classroom. This highlights the need for both pre-service and in-service training focused on inclusive practices. Additionally, the study emphasizes the value of peer support, effective communication, and collaborative planning with visually impaired students. These strategies can enhance classroom inclusivity and instructional effectiveness. A more detailed overview of these implications and corresponding suggestions is presented in Table 6.

Table 6.

Implications for Teaching

Finding	Implication
Importance of consistent teacher-student relationships	Maya emphasized the value of continuity. Stable relationships support trust and better learning experiences. Consider minimizing instructor changes for visually impaired learners when possible.
Instructors avoided common verbs like "see"	Neva avoided visual verbs out of concern. Over-cautious language use can unintentionally limit natural communication. Consider encouraging authentic language use, guided by student feedback, not assumptions.
Emotional sensitivity can be an asset	Leyla's empathy evolved into strength. Reflective teaching transforms emotional sensitivity into effective pedagogy. Consider promoting reflective practice and peer sharing among instructors.
Lack of accessible teaching materials	Challenges such as a lack of Braille materials, inaccessible LMS platforms, long reading passages, and undescribed videos point to systemic gaps in material accessibility. Consider collaborating with publishers for accessible resources (audio, Braille-ready, screen-reader-friendly). Provide instructors with guidelines to adapt materials.
Limited use of assistive technologies	Students like Almila could not fully use Braille or screen readers. Students may become overly dependent on instructors. Consider training staff in assistive technology (screen readers, audio tools); provide recorded texts or AI voice alternatives.
Instructors avoided teaching abstract/visual concepts	Avoiding such concepts can limit student learning. Consider teaching abstract ideas with context and metaphor; do not oversimplify content.
Instructors solved problems creatively without formal training	Murat and Leyla adapted successfully. Teacher autonomy can lead to effective adaptation. Consider fostering a culture of shared strategies and support among peers. Recognize and encourage innovation.
Systemic gaps in publishing standards	Materials are not inclusive. Lack of accessible content leads to inequity in learning opportunities. Consider advocating for policy change and publishing reform to ensure all EFL materials meet accessibility guidelines.
Absence of SEN training led to hesitation	İnstructors reported feeling unprepared. Lack of training prevents instructors from meeting student needs confidently. Consider integrating hands-on SEN modules into pre-service and in-service teacher education.
Instructors' emotional readiness is a key factor	Instructors' emotional reactions—ranging from guilt to anxiety—highlighted the emotional labor of inclusive teaching.
Describing visual content is essential	Describing images, visuals, and video content to ensure visually impaired students are included in meaning-making is useful for the students.
Balancing fairness and flexibility is crucial	Excluding critical skills such as spelling entirely may hinder long-term academic goals.
Visually impaired students mostly rely on auditory means	It is crucial for the visually impaired students to be able to hear the instructors clearly during the classes since they cannot rely on visual cues.
Instructors rely on peer support most of the time to assist visually impaired learners with task completion.	Peer support is a key factor for visually impaired learners' learning experiences.
Sharing materials in advance allows learners to prepare	Sending materials ahead of lessons allows learners using screen readers or assistive tools to prepare.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study examined the experiences and challenges faced by EFL instructors and the assistive strategies they used to accommodate the SEN of the visually impaired learners, emphasizing the importance of accessible materials and assistive technologies. Future studies could explore the effectiveness of collaborative efforts between educational institutions and publishers in developing and implementing accessible teaching materials, such as screen-reader-compatible texts and Braille-ready documents. Additionally, research is needed to evaluate the impact of systematic assistive technology training for both educators and students on academic autonomy and learning outcomes of visually impaired learners.

The study found that participants lacked formal training in teaching students with SEN, and for most, meeting a visually impaired student in their own classroom was their first such experience, resulting in several challenges. In light of this, one possible direction is to examine how visually impaired learners are currently taught English skills at various educational levels and whether there have been any improvements compared to previous studies, including this one. Additionally, research could focus on teaching specific skills such as spelling, reading, and writing.

The findings also highlighted that major publishing houses have largely failed to provide effective accessibility services for visually impaired learners. Consequently, investigating accessibility issues in relation to ELT materials and resources could be another valuable area of research.

The findings indicated that the peers of visually impaired learners can significantly influence their overall performance in the English classroom. However, there is limited research on the impact of peers on visually impaired learners' experiences in EFL education. Therefore, future researchers may want to explore studies involving both visually impaired learners and their peers.

Ethics Committee Permission Information

This research study was conducted with the Research Ethics Committee approval of Gazi University, dated 19.04.2022 and numbered 08.

Acknowledgment

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