

Stories of the visually impaired EFL learners in Turkey

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Abstract

Sighted and blind individuals live alongside each other in different parts of the world. In the basic principle of being human, sighted and blind individuals are not separate from each other. Visually impaired individuals differ from sighted individuals only in terms of their special needs arising from their visual impairment. Meeting these special needs is essential for visually impaired individuals to have equal opportunities with sighted individuals in various fields. Both parties must access quality and meaningful education as a fundamental human right. This situation is similar in foreign language education. Hence, this study aimed to explore what visually impaired students have been through while learning English as a foreign language. The study participants, designed as a narrative research, were five visually impaired university students who studied English as a foreign language. In the study, which was intended as qualitative research, data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The results of the research revealed that visually impaired students have had both positive and negative experiences during their English education.

Keywords: special educational needs, visual impairment, learning English as a foreign language

Türkiye'deki görme engelli İngilizce öğrenenlerin hikâyeleri

Özet (Türkçe)

Dünyanın farklı bölgelerinde, görme engelli ve gören bireyler bir arada yaşarlar. İnsan olmanın temel ilkesinde, görme engelli ve gören bireyler birbirinden farklı değildir. Görme engelli bireyler, sadece görsel engellerinden kaynaklanan özel ihtiyaçları açısından gören bireylerden farklıdır. Bu özel ihtiyaçların karşılanması, görme engelli bireylerin çeşitli alanlarda gören bireylerle eşit fırsatlara sahip olmaları açısından önemlidir. Temel bir insan hakkı olarak, her iki tarafın da kaliteli ve anlamlı eğitime erişim sağlaması gerekmektedir. Bu durum, yabancı dil eğitiminde farklı değildir. Nitel bir araştırma olarak tasarlanan bu çalışma, İngilizce öğrenme sürecinde görme engelli öğrencilerin yaşadıklarını keşfetmeyi amaçlamıştır. Bu öyküleyici araştırmanın katılımcıları, İngilizce'yi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen 5 görme engelli üniversite öğrencisidir. Araştırma, nitel bir araştırma olarak tasarlandı ve veriler yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler aracılığıyla toplandı. Sonuçlar, görme engelli öğrencilerin İngilizce eğitimleri sürecinde hem olumlu hem de olumsuz deneyimlere sahip olduklarını ortaya koymuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: özel eğitim ihtiyaçları, görme engelli, yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenme

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APA citation style: Ekinci, A., N., Dilek Bacanak, K. & Ulum Ö., G. (2024). Stories of the visually impaired EFL learners in Turkey. *International Journal of Educational Spectrum*, 6(1), 66-90. <https://doi.org/10.47806/ijesacademic.1394086>

Introduction

The study is conducted in response to the significant global issue of visual impairment, with the World Health Organization reporting 2.2 billion visually impaired individuals worldwide in 2019. In Turkey, the Turkish Statistical Institute's 2011 census revealed 1,039,000 visually impaired individuals. *Special Educational Needs* (SEN) is a legal term encompassing learners with difficulties or disabilities, and inclusive education requires adjustments to mainstream education to accommodate visually impaired learners. Turkish Ministry of Education regulations outline terms, conditions, and criteria for inclusive education, emphasising the importance of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for each student with special educational needs. Despite the extensive literature on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, there needs to be more focus on teaching EFL to visually impaired learners. The study aims to address this gap by exploring the experiences of visually impaired EFL learners in higher education in Turkey, providing insights to improve EFL teaching and learning contexts for this disadvantaged group.

Background of the Study

As per the World Health Organization (WHO), there were 2.2 billion individuals globally with visual impairment in 2019. In the context of Turkey, the Turkish Statistical Institute's 2011 population census survey, released in 2013, reported 1,039,000 visually impaired individuals in the country (Engelli ve Yaşlı Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü [General Directorate of Disabled and Elderly Services], 2021). *Special Educational Needs* (SEN) is a legal term employed to characterise learners facing specific difficulties or disabilities that render learning more challenging compared to those without such needs (nidirect.gov.uk, 2019). SEN can encompass physical, developmental, psychological, emotional, or sensory conditions. Inclusive education naturally requires adjustments to mainstream education to ensure that physical settings, instructional methods, and examination materials accommodate the special educational needs of visually impaired learners. Laws and regulations enforced by the Turkish Ministry of Education define and ensure the terms, conditions, specific arrangements, and criteria for inclusive education for visually impaired learners in primary and higher education. The "Regulation for Special Education Services/Practices" (Özel Eğitim Hizmetleri Yönetmeliği [Regulation on Special Education Services]) outlines special education, students with special educational needs, required services, institutional obligations, and organisational processes to uphold education standards without compromising quality and equality. In the regulation, inclusive education is defined, under section 1, article 4, item "ö," as full-time education in classes alongside peers or part-time in special education classes. It aims to ensure that individuals with special educational needs interact with others throughout their education while receiving supportive services to achieve their academic goals optimally (Özel Eğitim Hizmetleri Yönetmeliği [Regulation on Special Education Services], 2018). According to the regulations, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) must be crafted for each student with special educational needs.

Described and elucidated in section 4, article 20, the Individualized Education Program is articulated as follows:

“Individualized education program (IEP) ARTICLE 20 – (1)

Formulating an IEP based on the curriculum that individuals with special educational needs will adhere to throughout the academic year is imperative.

The program should encompass:

- a) Yearly and short-term objectives aligned with the curriculum,
- b) Specifications regarding the type and duration of the supportive educational service, detailing who will provide it and the methods of delivery,
- c) Approaches, techniques, and educational materials designated for instruction and assessment,
- ç) Guidelines about the educational environment,
- d) Strategies to preempt or mitigate behavioural issues, along with methods and techniques aimed at fostering positive behaviour,
- e) Personal information about the student.” (Regulation on Special Education Services, 2021, p. 7)

In previous centuries, foreign language education has been a topic of interest for scholars and experts. Recently, English has gained increasing prominence, evolving into the global lingua franca of the century (Jenkins, Cogo, & Dewey, 2011). English has become the primary means of communication among individuals from diverse countries, cultures, and linguistic backgrounds. Consequently, research and practices in the field have diverged, forming distinct branches. Thus, teaching and learning English as a foreign language emerged as a study area, particularly in countries where the local communities do not speak English. Following this development, experts, educators, scholars, and academicians have proposed and implemented numerous theories and methods in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Despite the vast amount of research and studies in this area, there is a notable scarcity of literature on the suggested theories, methods, and practices specifically tailored for teaching EFL to blind learners. The limited available data raises concerns about the historical methods used to teach English to visually impaired learners. Given the scarcity of literature in this area, it is not reasonable to expect teacher training programs to be adequately equipped with educators specialising in teaching EFL to blind learners. This lack of expertise leads to a shortage of courses and materials specifically designed for this demographic. The current situation necessitates reflecting on the quality of EFL education provided to blind learners and their experiences in language acquisition. Despite the challenges, individuals with special educational needs, including visual impairments, continue to pursue English language learning in EFL contexts today. The motivations behind their desire to learn English are similar to those without special needs, as revealed in a study by the Association of the Visually Impaired in Education (Eğitimde Görme Engelliler Derneği [Association for the Visually Impaired in Education]) with 48 students having special educational needs (eged.org, 2016). Hence, the need to address the voices of this disadvantaged group in Turkey is crystal

clear. Understanding the challenges they face is crucial to making necessary changes in EFL teaching and learning contexts, ensuring that education, one of the fundamental rights of individuals, is justified. Consequently, the present study aims to explore the experiences of visually impaired EFL learners in higher education in Turkey. In consideration of the purpose stated, the study seeks to answer the following question:

- 1- What are the general experiences of EFL learners with visual impairments in Turkey while learning English as a foreign language?

Research Design

The study is designed as a narrative inquiry that aims to reveal the stories of visually impaired learners who study at state and private universities in Turkey while learning English as a foreign language. By telling the stories of the individuals, the researchers aim to answer the questions related to their overall experience with learning the language. The researchers reached one of the student participants and then the other student participants with the guidance of the first participant. In other words, the researchers used convenient sampling and picked the participants available to participate in the study. The interviews were planned as semi-structured. The interviews were recorded in audio format and were transcribed through MS Word Online. After the application automatically transcribed the interviews, the researcher went through each interview to edit the parts that were misspelt or poorly transcribed by the application. By doing so, the researcher wanted to ensure the audio recordings were represented on the transcriptions precisely as they were.

Participants

The study participants are five visually impaired learners who have been learning English as a foreign language since elementary school. The study encompasses visually impaired learners in Turkey who began learning English as a foreign language during elementary school and continued their English education at state and private universities. The participants were chosen based on their visual impairment, English language learning experiences since elementary school, and diverse educational backgrounds. Eylül, currently a junior at university, was born prematurely and faced complications in her vision. Nil, continuing her studies in psychology with a double major in sociology, hails from a small town and lost sight despite eye surgeries. Bahar, aspiring to become an English teacher, also experienced vision loss due to oxygen absorption issues from premature birth. Almila, now a junior law student, dealt with nyctalopia, a medical condition causing night blindness and near blindness. Lastly, Yasemin, a junior law student, was born blind with limited colour sensation, pursuing a legal career in a family of academics, with her father and brother in law-related professions and her mother as a homemaker. These participants' unique experiences offer valuable insights into visually impaired learners' challenges and coping strategies at different educational levels and settings in their English language

education. The study involves five visually impaired learners with varied academic backgrounds. Eylül, facing complications from premature birth, attended regular schools and is now a junior psychology student. Nil, who lost sight at a young age, pursued psychology and sociology majors. Bahar, born blind, aspires to be an English teacher while studying psychology. Almila, with nyctalopia, overcame challenges in law studies, and Yasemin, born blind, fulfilled her dream of studying law with a focus on disability support. Their journeys highlight resilience and determination to pursue higher education despite visual impairments.

Findings and Discussion

What are the general experiences of EFL learners with visual impairments in Turkey while learning English as a foreign language?

During the interviews, the participants shared their memories regarding their experiences with learning English. The data analysis provided by the participants can be interpreted as the general experience of the visually impaired learners learning English as a foreign language, which made them feel in-between and confused about what they have experienced. All participants shared highly positive and negative memories and experiences from their English learning process from elementary school to university. Several factors caused the learners to feel in-between about their general experience with the language, and the determining factor was mainly related to their teachers and how they treated them in the classroom. In some cases, their relations with the teachers they had unpleasant experiences with got better after their teacher got to know them better. In other cases, however, there were no improvements. Moreover, while some of their teachers supported them with suitable accommodations for their SEN, the other teachers did not care much about providing these students with well-thought-out accommodations. Apart from their experiences with their teachers, the participants were also left in between about the quality of the service offered by the disability support units. Visually impaired participants primarily benefited from these units after they started university. While some participants benefited well from the services of the disability support units, others were provided with poor or no service. In some cases, the participants who could get help from the disability support unit for one issue could not get the same support for another. As a result, it is not possible to say that there is a clear picture of the participants' general experiences about learning English in their minds. On the contrary, their overall interpretation of their available experiences with the language is rather vague. The table below shows the general experiences of the participants, which were referred to as positive and negative, and the emotional attributions of the participants to their available experiences.

Table 1. Factors Affecting the General Experiences of Visually Impaired Learners with EFL

Factors Affecting the General Experiences of Visually Impaired Learners with EFL	
Positive	<i>f</i>
Presence of supportive EFL teachers	12
Presence of supportive peers	6
Presence of well-functioning disability support units	3
Presence of supportive parents	3
Negative	
The presence of biased teachers	12
Presence of poor accommodations by teachers	14
The presence of biased institutions	6
Lack of quality service by the disability support units	4
Emotional burnout	2
The presence of indifferent peers	1

Factors affecting the general experiences of visually impaired learners with EFL positively

As shown in Table 1, visually impaired learners have positive and negative perceptions about their general experiences with EFL. "Presence of supportive EFL teachers" is the most frequently mentioned item by the visually impaired participants in their interviews. Therefore, it can be said that it is the most critical factor in making students feel optimistic about their EFL education. From this, we can understand that having a supportive teacher can dramatically change a visually impaired learner's understanding of their process with EFL. Consequently, this finding also correlates to what has been found in the other studies in the literature. Like Omer's (2015) findings, most teachers had positive attitudes towards their visually impaired students. In addition, Attachoo and Sittihikul's (2021) findings also go hand in hand with the conclusions of the present study on the ground that participants in both studies mentioned that the motivational and educational support they got from their teachers helped them feel positive about their overall experience.

Bahar, who has been dreaming of becoming an English teacher since she was five and is studying to be an English teacher herself, expressed that her English teachers have always supported her during her English learning process.

"My teachers have always had a supportive attitude towards me during all levels of education I have been through. I mean, I have never heard them question my existence or my potential. I mean, they (teachers) have neither said, "You can't do it" or "Go to another school," nor excluded me or denied my existence. Their supportive attitude has naturally boosted my interest in English lessons."

-Bahar, Meeting 2

During her interviews, Yasemin often referred to one of her English teachers, who positively affected her perspective towards English. She also mentioned that she thought she improved her English skills whenever her teachers supported her.

“When I was in 10th grade, I had a new English teacher. She was an excellent person. She helped me improve in English, and honestly, I was affected by the teacher. Whenever I had a good English teacher, I got better in English. My teacher in 10th grade followed the idea of equality in education. For instance, we had an oral presentation describing a photo from our childhood. She did not exclude me from the task. Instead, we worked together so that I could describe the photo in English. She described the photo to me in Turkish, and I was able to describe my photo in English. It is not impossible for us (visually impaired learners) to perform these tasks if enough effort was put together.”

-Yasemin, Meeting 2

Like Yasemin, Nil also mentioned that her excellent relations with her English teacher and her teacher’s interest in Nil’s success in English positively affected her perspective towards English.

“We used to study together with my teacher. She would teach me how to spell and pronounce the vocabulary items. She would also include frequently confused vocabulary items due to their similar pronunciation. She would also tell me how to pronounce the letters in different positions in the vocabulary items. She was a very positive person. She has always been very positive with me, too. She thought I would end up in perfect places and positions. After our classes, we would have our little chats. She would tell me where she had been before as she knew I wanted to travel abroad. I would feel more motivated.”

-Nil, Meeting 2

Eylül mentioned that she was pleased with the positive attitude and personal interest she got from her teacher, Murat, who is also a participant in the present study.

“Oh, Murat teacher came to my mind. He would always inform me about the tasks and what we should do during our lessons. I never forget that. Each time, he would explain and say, “Now, we are doing this. Here, we will do it like this”.

-Eylül, Meeting 2

Like Eylül, Almila, who has low vision, she also benefited from her teacher’s supportive attitude and accommodations during the lessons.

“Apart from zooming the screen, my teacher would help me with the activities in the book, inform me about what to do, and describe the pictures when necessary.”

-Almila, Meeting 2

It can also be seen in the narrations of the visually impaired learners; their teachers have guided them while learning English with suitable accommodations and personal care. Instructions are essential for all language learners to make meaning of the classroom activities. Yet, they are even more critical for visually impaired learners because they need visual information from the book to read the instructions themselves. They must depend on their listening skills to understand instructions when Braille materials are unavailable. Moreover, if the activities require

understanding or interpreting visual clues, they need extra support with that, too. In visually impaired learners' narrations, it can be seen that their teachers personally dealt with the issue while giving instructions and describing visual content, which ultimately helped them feel more positive about their overall experience with their English classes. In Nil's case, her teacher studied with her beyond the class hours. In other words, she spent her time training Nil with spelling and pronunciation. As in Yasemin's case, instead of excluding her from an activity requiring visuals, her teacher described the visual to Yasemin so that she could be a part of the same task with her sighted peers. In short, it can be said that teachers and their way of treating their students are influential in making things suitable for visually impaired learners. Overall, the positive attitude they have witnessed from their teachers' side encouraged the visually impaired learners to continue learning English. On this ground, training teachers and providing them with the necessary insight and knowledge to approach and teach visually impaired learners is vital.

Following that, the visually impaired learners referred to their "supportive peers" second most frequently after their teachers as a factor that positively affected their overall experience with EFL. This finding is necessary because the existing literature has not yet focused on this issue. From this, we can understand that the support they get from their classmates while learning English can be meaningful to refer to their general experience with the language as positive. Although it is not the first thing that would come to be found as an influential factor in creating a positive understanding of the visually impaired learners' experiences with EFL, who they are learning the language with can be a determining factor.

Visually impaired participants referred to their peers during their interviews. Below, a collection of visually impaired learners' positive experiences with their peers are given with their narrations from their interviews.

Almila, who is partially sighted, mentioned in her interviews that she had encountered two helpful and neutral peers towards her. However, she does not regard her neutral peers as "bad" people; instead, she does not hold them responsible for helping her, even though she appreciates their support.

"Yes, I would ask for help from my peers. Sometimes, I would ask them when I couldn't see what was written (on the board) clearly, and they would help me. I mean, there were both supportive and indifferent people, but there was not anyone with disruptive behaviour, or they would not behave negatively. Yeah, like that. Some of them were indifferent, and the others were attentive."

-Almila, Meeting 2

Eylül also mentioned that her peers actively supported her during the preparatory lessons. Her friends would help them do the tasks in the lessons and read to her when necessary because she did not have the Braille version of the book.

"I mean, my classmates would help me. When we needed to do an activity, they would read to me from the book. Usually, my deskmate would read to me. And I would try to follow the lesson in this way."

-Eylül, Meeting 2

Compared to other participants, Bahar is more profoundly grateful to her peers for their supportive behaviour, encouraging her not to give up when she encountered hardships while learning English.

“Okay, how to put this. Well, they (peers) would appreciate my efforts and help me as well as they could. What I mean by helping here is not doing this for me. I mean helping and asking them to do so when I need it. Similarly, they would share their notes in elementary school or take notes on my computer during the lessons to help me save time. And in the end, seeing that somebody is helping you and acknowledging your efforts, you would feel more motivated to learn, thinking that you owe it to these people.”

-Bahar, Meeting 3

It can be seen in participants' answers that their peers are a part of their classroom performances. That is to say; they have a role in what they can or cannot do during their English classes. Sometimes, they compensate for the accommodations that failed to be provided by the support units. For instance, the visually impaired learners would not have needed somebody to read to them if they had had the Braille version of the lesson materials. In light of this, it can be seen that accessing Braille materials has not been accessible for the visually impaired learners during their English lessons, and their peers were assigned to help with the reading. Similarly, visually impaired learners cannot always take notes during the lessons because they do not have the technology to take notes in Braille or are not informed about what is written on the board. In both cases, their peers share their lesson notes with the visually impaired students so that they can copy them later. However, copying these notebooks is still not something a visually impaired learner can do independently, as the notes are not written in Braille. In this case, they need additional support from somebody else, usually their parents at home. In this case, it can be said that lack of Braille tools and materials causes the visually impaired learners to be dependent on somebody, which makes the visually impaired learners feel uncomfortable with their identities as disabled people on the ground that they are not provided with necessary means to do things themselves. In addition, the visually impaired participants in the study can be regarded as *lucky* because they have not experienced anything unpleasant with their peers. Still, some peers of the visually impaired learners might feel uncomfortable with helping them with the lesson activities because it might add a solemn responsibility to their shoulders. No peers should be held responsible for the success and inclusion of another peer in the lesson. Providing visually impaired learners with necessary accommodations and ensuring that both sighted and the visually impaired have access to quality and meaningful education is a responsibility which should belong to the institutions and educators.

According to the table, “well-functioning support units” during their process of learning English has been the primarily third mentioned factor by the visually impaired learners. This finding is necessary because it reviews the existing disability support units in the institutions. The studies conducted with the visually impaired learners in the literature do not specifically focus on disability support units and

whether they are effective for students' overall experiences with language learning. From this, it can be understood that although this unit supported some participants well, some were not. Nevertheless, only positive attributions of the learners with the support unit are shared here.

Although Nil mentioned that she had not witnessed the disability support unit function very well in her high school, she was pleased that she did not have to chase after people to provide them with necessary accommodations, especially during the exam weeks.

"At least they (the high school support unit) would assign me with an amanuensis (reader) so I would not bother with questions like "Who is going to read to me? Can somebody please read to me?"

-Nil, Meeting 2

Nil was also content with the disability support unit at her university, although she thought they provided mediocre service.

"Well, at least they (university disability support unit) were trying to do something as much as they could. I mean, it is not clear whether they are functioning properly or they can support well. But at the beginning of the term, I asked them to assign me a reader, and they would send a letter to the department about my request. This is the procedure."

-Nil, Meeting 3

During her interviews, Yasemin mentioned that she preferred to study at her current university because she knew there was a well-functioning disability support unit. Moreover, the school provided disabled students with scholarships, which act as discounts deduced from the college fees, as Yasemin is studying at a private university.

"I study at a university where they provide disabled students with good facilities. They (the support unit) assign us study partners with good grades from the upper classes. You can study with them in the library where they spared us (students with disabilities) private spaces for up to ten hours a week. And the physical conditions of the school are also good. You can follow the yellow ground markers everywhere and find Braille explanations everywhere on the campus. Now, they have started to provide the books online. Before that, I would go and scan the books."

-Yasemin, Meeting 1

In Nil's case, she mostly got support from the units for her exams. She was assigned a reader on her request for her exams. In Yasemin's case, it is possible to see the image of a better-functioning unit due to the accommodations they provide regarding academic assistance and physical environment, as well as accessing non-Braille materials. When compared to visually impaired learners' positive experiences with their teachers, their positive experiences with the disability support units, which are responsible for supporting these learners with accessing materials and suitable learning methods, as well as communicating with the teachers to provide visually impaired learners with reasonable accommodations, are relatively low. It should be

noted that it poses a possible recommendation to the institutions to monitor these units and provide them with necessary improvements to ensure they function well.

The final influential factor responsible for the visually impaired learners' positive understanding of their experiences with EFL is the support they got from their parents. In an idealised universe, parents of visually impaired learners would not be involved in their language learning process as much as they are today. Having supportive parents is necessary to have positive experiences with language learning because the teachers and the supporting units fail to ensure students with suitable materials for accommodations, and parents have to compensate for this. The participants have shared several memories with their parents and how they helped and got them motivated them to advance in English.

Eylül said that she and her parents would go over the lessons together as she did not have the Braille version of the coursebook.

My teacher did not use the book provided by the Ministry of Education (also offered in Braille), so I needed the Braille version of the book. I bought the same book, and my parents would help me as they knew English.

-Eylül, Meeting 1

Yasemin thinks she was lucky enough to have an English father. Still, she felt sorry for her visually impaired friends whose parents were not proficient in English because they could not do the activities independently as most lesson materials were not provided in Braille format. There was nobody to help them at home.

"The thing is, there are very few people who can speak English in their (visually impaired learners') families. My father knew English, but I had friends whose parents did not speak English. They could not do (activities)."

-Yasemin, Meeting 1

Bahar shared a heartwarming memory with her father during one of her interviews. After three years of special education at a school exclusive to the visually impaired, Bahar continued with inclusive education. Here, her English teacher would design the activities in a different format that Bahar needed help to make meaning of. Her father would help Bahar with these activities so she would not feel left out.

"As I mentioned, I used to get my friends' notebooks to copy the lesson notes. My teacher would get us to draw shapes like circles and squares, etc., and colour these shapes to teach us the colours. For instance, it says pink, and a shape is next to it. We had a gadget similar to a divider used by the sighted. My father used it to raise dots on the paper to construct shapes, and he got me to colour them. He did not want me to miss out on these things."

-Bahar, Meeting 1

Just like their peers, the parents of the visually impaired learners are also responsible for visually impaired learners' positive attribution of their experiences with EFL. It can be seen that their parents have supported the visually impaired learners in terms of their overall motivation to continue learning English and the schoolwork they needed to do. In Eylül's and Yasemin's case, they could do their English homework with the help they got from their parents. In Bahar's case, the continuous efforts of her father to

make her feel included even with the concepts which were mostly meaningful to sighted individuals can show us that visually impaired learners should not necessarily be excluded from activities which require understanding of visuals but should be supported with suitable modifications so that the same concepts can be meaningful for them too in different ways. From this finding, it can be understood that parents' having English literacy can be a game changer in learners' overall performances with EFL. If the parents do not speak English, the learners will probably lack the extracurricular support necessary for them, primarily if they are not supported well enough by their teachers or the disability support units. This means that the effect of the parents on visually impaired learners' academic success in English could be studied and investigated.

Factors affecting the general experiences of visually impaired learners with EFL negatively

The negative attributions of the visually impaired learners with their general experiences of learning EFL are the cordial presence of biased teachers, the presence of poor accommodations by teachers, the presence of limited institutions, lack of quality support by disability support units, emotional burnout, and the presence of indifferent peers. At a glance, it is not wrong to say that the first two factors are directly related to the teachers and the accommodations provided by teachers. In this case, it can be said that compared to other factors, teacher-related factors are the most determinative factors for learners' overall negative experiences with English.

During their interviews, the visually impaired participants shared several memories when they were left with a biased teacher who was indifferent to their needs and even denied that they existed in the classroom. The comparison with the previous studies in the literature is given after relevant examples mentioned by the participants.

When she was about to start studying at the preparatory school of her high school, which she specifically preferred because they had an English initial program different from the other high schools, Bahar encountered something she never expected. Her English teacher believed Bahar was enrolled because her family knew some important people.

"When I first started at the preparatory school in my high school, my teachers and the advisor teacher arranged a meeting with my family. My family later told me about this to inform me just in case. The teacher, who was also my homeroom teacher and with whom till this day I have been in contact – I mean, the one I am going to share is a bad memory, but after that, she never evaluated me in that way. At first, she thought that I came to this school thanks to an influential contact. She told my parents that the preparatory school would be a difficult process for me and that I would not be able to succeed. She said that they had used different books (than the books provided by the Ministry of Education) and had a very heavy curriculum, and she said that she had not believed that I would be successful before she even met me."

-Bahar, Meeting 1

Even though her relations with her teacher got better later on after she had proved her teacher wrong with her extraordinary interest and skills in English, Bahar still had to experience such a negative incident in which she was alleged to be included in an unfair appointment to her school and her skills were questioned just because she was visually impaired.

Although this was her first encounter with a biased teacher, it was unfortunately not the last one. Bahar had another English teacher during high school. In one of the lessons where Bahar made a mistake in an activity, her teacher's response left Bahar shockingly disappointed.

"In one of our exams, I made a mistake and gave a wrong answer to a question. She (the English teacher) told me I would not become an English teacher. She told me this just because I made one mistake."

-Bahar, Meeting 1

However, Bahar proved her teacher wrong again when she got accepted to an English Language Teaching department at one of the excellent state universities. When she was about to take the English proficiency exam to be exempt from preparatory school at the university, her English tutor went to the department and talked on Bahar's behalf, which was beyond her request. Her tutor had a friend at the preparatory school and asked them not to include reading activities in Bahar's exam because she thought Bahar would not pass the test otherwise.

"My tutor told me that she went to talk to one of her friends at the preparatory school of my university. She told them not to include reading activities in the exams. However, she would feel surprised when we studied reading together, and I kept all the information in my mind and answered the questions easily. She would tell people that even she could not keep those (reading texts) in her mind, but I could. I asked her, "Teacher, why did you need to do something like this? I mean, I never told you that I could not do reading activities" She told me that she wanted to make things easier for me. I said: "Well, okay, but maybe we created a false idea in the preparatory school teachers' minds as if a visually impaired learner cannot do reading activities." She said she did not think they would perceive it that way. And it is not nice because I never asked her to do that. I mean, they did not help me during the exam or did not change my questions, but still, why did she have to do something like this, especially when I never asked her to do so?"

-Bahar, Meeting 3

From Bahar's reaction, it can be understood that visually impaired learners are offended when people decide what they are or are not capable of on their behalf. In Bahar's case, her teacher knew how good Bahar was with reading activities, yet this did not stop her from interfering. This is a clear picture of how visually disabled learners are perceived by some teachers and how they are to be spoon-fed. This does not do anything but create a false image of the visually impaired learners in society.

Yasemin reported that her English teacher would still need to answer her requests during the lessons. And what is worse is that she thought her teacher pretended not to hear what Yasemin said.

"When I ask about the spelling of a word during our lessons, my English teacher in 9th grade in high school would ignore what I asked her. She would either ignore what I said or tell me, "Now we do not have time for that; you can copy it from your peers' notes later". After this, how can you expect the students to show some effort on their own to learn English? I think the teacher factor is significant in this case. When I first started learning English, I liked it. But now, I do not want to see anything in English."

-Yasemin, Meeting 2

From her narrations, it can be seen that the unsupportive teachers of English she had during her learning of English caused her to lose interest in the language. This is a critical observation for providing a clear picture of how teachers can simultaneously make things great and terrible for their learners. Therefore, teachers must be aware of their impact on learners' interest and enthusiasm in the language.

During high school, Yasemin had a couple of English teachers, and she experienced a series of mistreatments by one of these teachers. The teacher repeatedly denied her existence in the classroom, and after some time, Yasemin thought that her teacher was making fun of her condition.

"Once in high school, we were about to study together with my English teacher. He brought some practice tests. After putting the tests on my desk, he said: "Okay, you go ahead and start, and I will be back in a couple of minutes," and left the classroom before I could explain anything. He knew my condition; I did not understand why he behaved like that. When he returned, I told him I could not start because the materials were not in Braille. The same incident happened one more time. I had a Math teacher whom I liked very much. I told him about this incident, and he got furious. He asked my English teacher, "Are you doing this on purpose?". My English teacher was very problematic; soon after our classes ended, he was transferred to another school. I think it was an act of banishment."

-Yasemin, Meeting 3

An extreme case can be seen in Yasemin's unpleasant experience with her English teacher. Apart from this horrible incident, one cannot help but think about how this teacher treated the other students in his new school. Whether or not the teacher behaved in this particular way on purpose, it can be seen how indifferent and even hostile individuals can behave towards visually impaired individuals. From this, it can be understood that it is essential to educate and equip prospective teachers with professional skills and basic human skills, such as *empathy*. The experiences of Yasemin and Bahar with inconsiderate teachers are similar to what the other visually impaired participants had experienced before in Çelik's (2019), Karaca's (2021), and Çınarbaşı's (2016) previous studies where the students' requests were neglected, and they had to be exposed to inconsiderate treatment by their teachers.

Almila had an unpleasant incident with one of her English teachers in high school. Almila is partially sighted, and her vision was better enough to let her read with magnifying tools and texts with large font sizes. However, her vision started to

deteriorate when she started high school. During the first lesson with her new English teacher, Almila had to go through the following.

"I remember an incident from high school. In high school, my vision got worse. We had a new English teacher; it was his first lesson. After some time, he asked me to read something in the book. I told him that I could not read well. My friends also informed him that I could not read well. But he insisted that I should read and said, "Why would she not be able to read? She can." This never happened again with this teacher. I remember that my friends told him about my visual condition because I used to sit at the front near the window so that I could read better. But that day, I sat beside a friend in the back row when he asked me to read. When I could not read there, he wanted me to change my seat so maybe I could read better. I sat next to the window but could not read there either. "

-Almila, Meeting 1

In this incident, it seems that the teacher refused to believe what Almila and her peers told him about her visual condition and insisted that Almila should do something which she explained to be beyond her physical ability. It is known that visually impaired learners can be compassionate about their disability, and being a teenage girl, Almila might have felt more uncomfortable because the incident took place in front of her peers. Here, the teacher's insistence on his senseless request can be an example of how visually some see impaired individuals in society. Some people with a biased view of visually impaired individuals think that they use their visual condition to get away with things in life as if they abuse their visible condition to get things done in their way. A similar biased understanding of the visually impaired learners was present in Villalba's (2022) recent study, where the school manager accused the visually impaired learners of being manipulative.

During her interviews, Nil mentioned that when she was about to start her inclusive education in elementary school, the school teachers told her parents that they did not believe Nil would be able to be successful, even if they had never met her yet. Nil mentioned in her interviews that she had encountered a similar school of thought by her English teachers.

"I am not sure, but I guess they thought we (visually impaired learners) were hopeless. There was little interest from their (teachers') side. As I mentioned earlier, this affects one's motivation. Because when you are younger, you are more motivated to learn a foreign language. I mean, at least I was. I was very interested in English. I wanted to speak, learn, and understand English, but our lessons were not as they were supposed to be."

-Nil, Meeting 1

Like Yasemin, Nil was eager to learn English when first introduced to the language. However, like Yasemin, she has experienced demotivation caused by her teachers' lack of interest and belief in her skills.

The second most frequently referred affective factor for making visually impaired learners' experiences with EFL negative is the presence of poor accommodations by teachers. Although this item looks similar to the first item as it is also related to the

teachers, it is different because the teachers were not necessarily tagged as biased by the learners. On the contrary, visually impaired learners described some of these teachers with good intentions but lacked the necessary training and insight. However, some teachers have been told to be neglectful, which explains why the students regarded their accommodations as poor. During their interviews, the visually impaired participants shared their memories in which they felt their teachers failed to support them with suitable accommodations. Below, some excerpts from their narrations are shared and discussed in alignment with the previous studies conducted on the phenomenon.

Almila said that during high school, she never asked for accommodations. She did not specify any reasons for not asking for accommodations, but it can be interpreted that she felt shy to request her teacher to provide her with some moderation.

"My English teachers have never provided me with any accommodations during my four years of high school education, and I have never asked them to do so. For instance, my teacher would naturally bring photocopies in small font size to save paper, and I could not read them."

-Almila, Meeting 1

Compared to other visually impaired participants in the present study, it is more difficult for Almila to ask people to do something for her due to her nature. From this, we can understand that teachers should not expect visually impaired learners to request accommodations or give feedback. Still, they must communicate with the students and ask for feedback to give them meaningful class moderation.

During her listening classes, Eylül reported that most of the time, she would listen to the videos without participating in the activities because she was usually not informed about these videos or supported with necessary accommodations so that she could join in the lesson.

"I don't remember much, but generally, they did not use to do such things (accommodations). I would ask the teachers to explain what we were supposed to do, but generally, they would not inform me if I did not ask first. While my friends watched videos, I would listen or sometimes ask one of my peers to describe a visual to me. They (English teachers) would use some materials and do their lessons but would not change these materials for me."

-Eylül, Meeting 2

In Eylül's case, it can be seen that the teacher did not bother to get feedback from Eylül or ask whether she could follow the lesson. This is an example of how teachers can turn lessons into pointless sessions for visually impaired learners when they do not try to include them in their lessons by providing explanations, instructions, and suitable materials.

In one of her interviews, Bahar said that her teachers did not support her with quick accommodations, which was very easy for Bahar. Instead, she witnessed that her teachers put the responsibility on their peers' shoulders.

"My teacher would tell my deskmate to study with me when we were supposed to do an activity in the classroom. She would say, "Tell your friend (Bahar), read and

do it together". But instead of this, if they had spelt the words when they asked the class to note them down, I would have written that, too. Teachers unavoidably depend on their peers as we (visually impaired learners) copy their notes. I observed that many teachers' minds were at ease because of that."

-Bahar, Meeting 1

From Bahar's case, it can be seen how important the support they got from their peers was for the visually impaired learners as sometimes they were not supported by their teachers. However, their peers did not graduate from university to teach English, so they are not responsible for helping their friends learn the language. The teachers were educated and trained to teach English and adapt their lessons when necessary.

Like Bahar, Yasemin could only follow the lessons thanks to her peers during the first year of high school. She said that her teacher would not care much about spelling the words while teaching vocabulary, and she could not learn how to spell them because she needed the coursebook in Braille format.

"When I was in 9th grade, my teacher would ask us to do translations very often. My peers could do all the listening, grammar and writing tasks, but I was behind them in all aspects. I could participate in the listening classes, but I could neither read nor write because I did not have the coursebook in Braille. We were learning different words, but I could not learn how to spell them because my teacher would not tell me how to spell the words. I could only take notes on how to spell the words when my deskmate told me how to do it. My friends benefited from our teacher's classes, but I could not. Maybe if I had had the Braille version of the book, it would have been different."

-Yasemin, Meeting 1

It is important to note that Yasemin mentioned that her peers could benefit from her teacher's classes, but she did not. This shows that Yasemin was discriminated against by her teacher for not providing her with the necessary accommodations. While everybody in her class improved and improved in English daily, Yasemin could not catch up with them and was left behind.

Unfortunately, this was not the only time her teacher left Yasemin with poor decisions. Yasemin said that her teacher thought to exclude her from writing assignments because he did not know how to read in Braille.

"I mean, this writing thing had been problematic in 9th grade. The teacher said, "Let's exclude you from writing. I cannot read what you write," but I think anything can be done when you want to do it."

Yasemin, Meeting 1

In Yasemin's case, it can be seen how reluctant the teacher was to provide accommodations for her SEN. Instead of thinking of alternative ways to assess Yasemin's writing skills, he wanted to exclude her from the assignments for good, even before trying them. However, it is not impossible for a sighted to read a visually impaired individual's writing thanks to recent technological advances. She could have used a Braille display to convert Braille writing to Latin writing. If Braille display had not been available, she could have used dictation software to convert speaking into

writing. In cases where the software was unsuitable, she could have got help from her parents or one of her peers to write it down. The point is that there are many options to consider before saying “you cannot” to a visually impaired learner. Yasemin’s and Villalba’s (2022) cases are not correlated because while one of the teachers excluded his student from writing, the other one learned Braille language to read her student’s writing.

The visually impaired participants also shared some issues related to their exams where their teachers failed to support them with meaningful accommodations. Nil went to an elementary school exclusively for the visually impaired. Her teacher would read the exam questions and options to Nil and her peers, and they would put a mark on the options printed out in Braille. Nil found out that her teacher was changing her intonation when she was about to read the correct choice during the exams, which is something commonly done by exam readers.

“We had a problem like this, and she would do the same in the exams. She would emphasise the correct option.”

Nil, Meeting 3

Nil mentioned that she could get high grades on her exams in elementary school because she had figured out how to find the correct options. Even though she liked having good grades in her lessons, this was against Nil’s favour as she did not care much about the exams and did not feel the need to study for them. It can be said that what teachers sometimes do to help their visually impaired learners causes more damage.

This was not the only incident of Nil with an exam. In 11th grade, she had an English teacher in high school who did not teach anything but chatted with them during her lessons. However, as she had to take an examination due to the regulations, she would devise simple tasks for the students to give them high grades. In one exam, she asked the class to listen to a song in English and fill in the empty spaces of the song lyrics on the paper. Nil went to her teacher to modify the activity because she could not do it alone. The teacher did not come up with any solutions, and Nil offered her to memorise and sing the song to her teacher.

“I went to my teacher to tell them that I could not do this task, and I did something else instead, but she did not give me a high score. My peers wrote the song lyrics in the blanks in the exam. I thought I could not do it, so I thought I should do something else. I memorised the song and went to my teacher and sang the song. I offered her this option. And in the end, while my peers got scores between 95 to 100, she gave me something like 75 or 80. Well, what can you do? - it is her perspective.”

-Nil, Meeting 3

It is a teacher’s responsibility to come up with appropriate ways to test students’ skills. Still, in Nil’s case, it can be seen that Nil had to decide on her accommodation because she would not be supported by one of their teachers.

When it came to teaching spelling, Nil said that her teacher would not teach the spelling of the words because she thought it might be difficult for them to learn. She just stuck with the pronunciation of the vocabulary items.

"I guess the only accommodation she made was not to teach the spelling of the words but to teach them with Turkish spelling of the words' pronunciations because it would be hard to read and pronounce the words in their original form."

-Nil, Meeting 1

Here, it is possible to see another failed accommodation by the teacher. The teacher's wrong decision in not providing students with English spelling of the words caused them not to learn how to spell the words correctly.

Following the first two teacher-related items, the third most frequently brought up item by visually impaired learners is the presence of biased institutions. The word "biased" is essential because it bears a very negative subjective treatment, not related to the institutions' facilities or departments but to individuals in charge of these departments or institutions. To put it differently, it can be said that this item emerged as a result of the visually impaired learners' unpleasant experiences with the managers of the institutions they were supposed to attend. Below, memories of the visually impaired learners with the administrative personnel in the educational institutions they studied are shared and discussed.

Bahar started inclusive education in elementary school in 3rd grade. When his family talked to the school administrator, they were asked a question they would have never expected.

"And the teachers we thought would help us out were not hospitable. For instance, the school administrator asked my father, "Is she going to start preschool?" He asked my father something like this. I mean, what is the point? Why did he ask something like this?"

-Bahar, Meeting 1

One might think that the school administrator may have seen Bahar and felt she might have been younger due to her appearance. However, as Bahar's parents were there to talk about the transition process of Bahar to inclusive education in the 3rd grade, this must not have been the reason behind the school administrator's question. The administrator probably thought that Bahar did not have the necessary skills to continue inclusive education from the 3rd grade as she came from a school exclusive to the visually impaired. It isn't easy to understand how it can be possible for these administrators to judge visually impaired learners in a minute and trust their intuition so much.

Nil completed elementary education at a school exclusive to the visually impaired. However, no schools are premier for the visually impaired at the high school level. When her parents went to talk to the high school administration, they encountered a similar bias that Bahar had experienced when she was about to start her inclusive education in elementary school.

"Something happened when I was about to start high school. My parent went to school before the registration to see the environment. The vice administrator asked my parents: "Why did you choose this school? How can we provide this child with education? Is not there a special high school for them?"

-Nil, Meeting 1

Nil proved her school administrators wrong when she graduated as the top student in her high school and got accepted into the psychology department at one of the major universities in Turkey. Besides revealing how pre-determined the school administrators can be towards visually impaired learners, Nil's case is also essential on the grounds of what schools might be missing because of their biased administrators. Although Nil did not specifically draw attention to her high school, it is natural for people to hear the name of the high school through extraordinarily successful students.

Yasemin got a place at one of the high schools well known for its success in one of the major cities in Turkey. Her extraordinary success, however, was not enough to change the school administrator's biased view of the visually impaired learners.

"Our school administrator was a very biased person. There were three visually impaired learners in that high school. I remember him saying: "They send these visually impaired learners to good high schools like this one, and they (visually impaired learners) cannot do the lessons, but they gradually graduate in one way or another."

-Yasemin, Meeting 3

During one of her interviews, Yasemin also critiqued the administration of special education schools for visually impaired learners.

"First, let me tell you this: this is the biggest problem of special education schools for the visually impaired. Okay, yes, everybody is visually impaired, but none of us have the same potential or skills. I mean, yes, it was like this in high school, too, but in special education schools, sometimes there are students with an additional disability. This would usually be a mental disability. And these students would generally be ignored. This was the part I was saddest about. It was the same in English classes as well. Those students would sit still in a corner."

-Yasemin, Meeting 3

It is the administrators' responsibility to ensure classrooms are well designed regarding students' SEN and skills, and teachers' responsibility to ensure all the students are included and not left out. However, in this case, it is possible to see the complete opposite of the image of special education schools and how they were supposed to operate. In addition, Yasemin's criticism of special education schools for the visually impaired is also influential because it shines a light on a question not primarily asked in the literature before: "What might visually impaired students with an additional disability experience in their classes?"

Although they need an excuse or proper to implement such regulation, Yasemin said that her department's administration prevented the teachers from providing extra time for the students with SEN in their exams.

"For instance, we were not given extra time in our exams. Usually, it is our right to get spare time, but our department (administrators) prohibited this."

-Yasemin, Meeting 3

Following the institutions, the poor-functioning disability support units are following on the list. The lack of quality service by the disability support units is the fourth most

referred negative factor affecting the general experiences of visually impaired learners with EFL. However, the findings show that visually impaired learners are affected by individual mistreatments more negatively than corporate mistreatments. This shows us that individual figures such as teachers and administrators are more likely to determine the general understanding of the visually impaired learners with the overall experience during their learning of EFL. One teacher or school manager could be efficient enough to help students create pleasant experiences for visually impaired learners. Therefore, they should be aware of how significant their impact can be on these learners so that it can be possible for the visually impaired learners to have good memories of learning EFL. Below, several excerpts are shared from the interviews with the visually impaired participants and discussed.

Eylül said that although once she had contacted the support unit in her university to benefit from their services, she has never heard from them again.

"Yes, I had contacted the disability support unit at my university once. There was a form, and I saw that. It said they (the unit) would arrange for somebody from my department to study with me. They never got back to me about this despite the countless times I filled out the form. This is the least I can say about the support unit."

-Eylül, Meeting 1

What Eylül's parents have shared about the Braille display device and its impact on Eylül's better performance in spelling in English shows us how assistive technology can be helpful and a game changer for a student's success and advancement in the English language.

Bahar said that most of her professors at the university needed to provide her with reasonable accommodations. A slight improvement was present even if she brought up the issue with the support unit.

"I wish I could say that my professor had done (accommodations). For instance, they were not able to find the suitable materials. I mean, converting a document into MS Word format must not be too difficult to do. Of course, some professors helped me as much as possible by providing PDF versions of the materials or sharing the online version of the coursebook. It will not be nice to forget about them, but many professors did nothing."

-Bahar, Meeting 3

Like Bahar, Nil was left alone by the support unit to look for her means to access accommodations when she first came to study at her university.

"Apart from this, I asked the unit about scanners or Braille display devices and how and where to access these utilities. They say, "There is a centre for this at the school; go there and ask about it". I mean, I am new in this city, and I do not know much about the city. How can I go and ask about these?"

-Nil, Meeting 3

Next on the list is emotional burnout experienced by the visually impaired participants. This finding can be explained as a general dissatisfaction felt by the

participants after all the challenges they have been through while studying EFL. All of the negative factors in Table 8 are responsible for making the visually impaired participants desperate and hopeless with their general experience with the language. Eylül said that she wishes her general experience with English had been different, not negative.

"Now I say, if I had not experienced these, I would be better now; at least I would have liked learning English like I did at university. It would have been better for me."

-Eylül, Meeting 3

Nil also mentioned that her experience with learning English had differed from how she expected it to be.

"My overall experience with EFL affected my motivation to learn English negatively more than it affected my language skills. All I had experienced until this time, like not learning English adequately and not learning the language when I was supposed to do it, all caused me to lose some of my motivation. I mean, I am still struggling with English as of today. Like, I am still struggling with English."

The final and the least frequently mentioned factor responsible for the participants' negative interpretation of their experiences with EFL is the presence of indifferent peers. This finding is determined by only one of the visually impaired participants' experience with a peer.

During one of her interviews, Nil shared that she was not favoured by her peers in elementary school because she was the only person who wanted to learn something in the lessons. She said she had felt angry with her friends because she believed their distractive behaviour sabotaged the lessons.

"I was annoyed by my peers in the elementary school. They would not let the teacher do the lesson in peace. Because of their behaviour, our class had a bad reputation. We were seen as hopeless as a class. It was the same in English classes as well. It was not possible to go with only my efforts."

-Nil, Meeting 1

Almost all participants shared positive thoughts about their peers and their supportive behaviour under the positive factors. What is more, Almila said that she used to have indifferent peers, but it did not affect her negatively. However, this is different in Nil's case because her peers were not apathetic to Nil but to lessons. From this, we can understand that visually impaired participants reacted to similar variables differently. While Almila did not think much about her peers' neutral treatment towards her, for Nil, on the other hand, her peers' being indifferent to English lessons was a problematic issue, which added another point for negativity to her overall view of EFL education.

Conclusion

In summary, exploring visually impaired learners' experiences in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) has uncovered a multifaceted landscape shaped by various positive and negative elements. Positive aspects include the crucial role of supportive

EFL teachers, understanding peers, well-functioning disability support units, and encouraging parental involvement, all of which contribute to positive educational experiences. On the flip side, negative encounters arise from biased teachers, insufficient accommodations, institutional biases, inadequacies in disability support services, emotional burnout among learners, and the indifference of peers. The diverse influences emphasise the necessity for a comprehensive and inclusive approach to EFL education tailored for visually impaired learners. Addressing these factors becomes imperative to create a more equitable and enriching educational experience, ensuring that all learners can actively participate and thrive in English language education, regardless of their visual abilities. This holistic approach aims to promote a supportive environment that accommodates the unique needs of visually impaired learners, fostering an inclusive and accessible educational landscape. In light of the diverse challenges and opportunities revealed by examining visually impaired learners' experiences in learning English as a foreign language (EFL), several vital suggestions emerge to enhance the overall educational landscape for this demographic. Firstly, there is a pressing need for increased awareness and sensitivity training for EFL teachers to eliminate biases and promote inclusive teaching practices. Institutions should prioritise the provision of adequate accommodations, such as accessible learning materials, technologies, and supportive environments, to facilitate the active participation of visually impaired learners. Additionally, disability support units should be equipped with well-trained personnel and resources to offer comprehensive assistance tailored to the unique needs of visually impaired students. Collaborative initiatives involving educators, parents, and peers can foster a supportive network, ensuring a positive and inclusive learning environment. Furthermore, developing and implementing specialised teacher training programs focused on adapting EFL methodologies for visually impaired learners can contribute to more effective and inclusive language education. Overall, a concerted effort from educational stakeholders, policy adjustments, and resource allocation are essential to create an inclusive EFL educational framework that caters to visually impaired learners' diverse needs.

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Author Contributions

All authors have contributed equally to this article.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have declared no conflict of interest in this study.

Funding

The authors did not receive any funding for this article from any institution.

Note

This research paper, adapted from the master's thesis titled "Learning English as a Foreign Language: Stories of the Visually Impaired EFL Learners in Turkey – A Narrative Inquiry" by Ayşe Nur Ekinçi, was submitted to the Department of Foreign Language Education at Gazi University, Graduate School of Educational Sciences, in September 2022.