

Challenges of a Hearing-Impaired Learner in Online Language Education

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Abstract

Equal access to education has been a global concern and the importance of inclusive education (IE) has been emphasized in respecting the diverse needs, abilities, and characteristics of learners all over the world and in eliminating discrimination in the learning environments. IE emphasizes the rights of all children with or without special needs to have equal access to the same social, cultural, and educational opportunities in the same educational settings. While IE is embraced at the conceptual level and desired at the classroom level, successful implementation of IE practices often remains highly complex.

Although the term "inclusion" has been used in Turkish educational policies since 1983, significant progress has been made in the last five years. Regardless of the severity of their hearing loss, deaf or hearing impaired (HI) students are expected and encouraged to attend general education classes.

Studies conducted with HI students at tertiary level are few; findings generally indicate that these students have poorer academic qualifications and are mostly excluded from university education. They face many challenges during their education: they require more assistance, are more subject to marginalization than their hearing peers, fall behind their peers, and have hard time especially with group work due to the need for engagement with others. It is evident that they need support in mainstream education to participate in learning activities on an equal term with their hearing peers; unrestricted communication and attitudinal barriers, individualized support based on valid assessments of learning needs, and modified curricula to accommodate deafness is required. However, the sudden shift to online education due to the COVID-19 pandemic increased the severity of the implementation problem: distance education was a challenge for students and instructors, but especially for students with disabilities. As distance and/or hybrid education will continue at tertiary level in Turkey, like in many other parts of the

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world, it is highly important to explore this issue. This longitudinal case study of qualitative nature took place at a state university in the southeast of Turkey with three participants: a HI L2 English learner who is a freshman enrolled at the English Language Education Department and his two instructors. Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews, journals, and narrative report. Interviews were conducted with the student about the challenges he had and instructors' practices during distance education, and with instructors about their general opinions towards IE and their online education practices regarding the inclusion of that student specifically. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The analyses of student data revealed one major theme as "rechallenge" of an already challenging life and subthemes as nature of online education, instructors' practices, delayed/ limited feedback, and lack of interaction. Instructors' data revealed themes as beliefs about IE and need for training. Findings presented the challenges of online education for a HI with significant implications, suggesting many solutions to the problems such learners face, and contributing to raising public awareness on IE.

Keywords: Challenges, higher education, inclusive education, online education