**Overall Comments:**

* **Abstract:** Your abstract includes concepts such as personal growth and psychological development; however, it is unclear how these fit in with your research question about learning English as a second language.
  + Further, make sure that the phrasing you choose fits with the rest of your article.
  + My suggestion is that after you make all the changes to your article, that you then go back to the abstract and revise, making sure to use the *same terminology* as you use in the main text.
* **Introduction:** The introduction is not specific enough to your research question. You want to use the introduction to give the reader a hint of the themes to come. Bronfenbrenner’s model can be a good one to use as an organizing theme, with a focus on the microsystem, which includes family, friends, school context. Then, you can move the references you included in the findings section to the introduction.
  + You will want to make sure that you continue to bring back the focus to English as a second language 🡪 why this is an important topic to study and why among the visually impaired specifically.
  + You have information about this throughout (with a lot of information coming in later during the discussion), but you want to have it up front in the introduction because, after all, this is the main point of your work.
* **Method section**: You need to include a description of how you came up with the themes.
  + Please see my specific comments in that section.
* **Findings:** The findings section should *not* include references. It should be focused solely on what you gathered from the participants and the themes you came up with**. You will want to include many quotes from your participants to give concrete examples to your reader**. This is of crucial importance for a qualitative study. (Without quotes, it is entirely unclear how you came up with these themes.)

**\*\*More specific comments are included in the comments below.**

**External factors and their effect on the learning of English as a foreign language among students with visual impairments**

**Nagar, R & Krisi, M**

Abstract: This qualitative study addresses the external factors that influence the learning experience of English as a foreign language among students who are visually impaired (henceforth VI). 28 students with VI were interviewed on their experience of learning a foreign language (English) both in high school and as university students. Three themes, external factors, emerged from the interviews: family, friends, and school culture. Findings showed that behavioral and academic parental and familial expectations, and a stable and caring home setting, fostered participants' success in learning a foreign language. The study also illustrated the importance of friends in making individuals with VI more accepted and helping them to be socially as well as academically successful. It was also found that differences in school atmosphere and culture towards inclusion of students with VI acted as a promoting or impeding factor in motivating these students to succeed in their foreign language learning.

**Introduction**

Visual impairment (VI) relates to an injury to the eye or to a neural injury in the visual system which cannot be repaired by visual aids. This impairment limits the individual’s ability to recognize or see details in a sharp and accurate manner from a defined distance. Current literature points out that different factors within the physical environment (technological and navigational aids) trigger responses of anxiety and insecurity among blind and visually impaired individuals (Gustafson-Pearce, Billet, and Cecelja: 2005). In fact, most research thus far has dealt with the immediate physical environment of the visually impaired student. Studies found that students with VIs can benefit from the use of assistive technologies in studying a foreign language (Susanto & Nanda 2018; Sousa 2013).

Students with VI, like their sighted counterparts, are obligated to complete their English foreign language studies to meet the requirements of the higher education institution.

A review of the literature on second language acquisition for learners with VI reveals a different approaches. Some claim that learners with VI follow the same patterns of learning as their sighted counterparts, provided that there is a reasonable threshold competence in the first language (Cummins, 1984). Other research indicate that blind people are particularly well equipped for foreign languages as their impairment forces them to compensate for their deficiency by developing their other senses, especially their hearing (Morrissey 1931). Further support for this view comes from Nikolic (1986) who claims that blind people have great potential to acquire a foreign language successfully, due to their increased aural sensitivity and intense memory training. Thus, he supports the teaching of foreign language to students with VI within the framework of mainstream education, provided that the instructional material be adapted to their needs.

Still others claim that the differences in the process of foreign language acquisition of the visually impaired and the sighted outweigh the similarities. According to Guinan (1997), individuals with VI have distinct needs that are different from those of their sighted peers, which in turn direct them toward different routes when acquiring a second or a foreign language. She criticizes the oral-aural method in which students get good mastery of the language sound system before being introduced to vocabulary and grammar, since the students do not necessarily master speaking and listening skills before reading and writing. Also, for students with VI, the learning experience is different than that of sighted students, as students with VI are not exposed to all the visual information in English sighted people are bombarded with. Owing to minimal exposure to the written word, their spelling skill is negatively affected, which is one of the most difficult skills to master, especially in English.

According to Muñoz (2004), second language instruction in class is primarily visual and is based mostly on sensory exploration, therefore, the information students with VI get is reduced, and may even be limited or distorted. Since they cannot learn a foreign language through exposure and experiences, they have to rely on prior knowledge in order to understand what they hear. Moreover, they have difficulty learning abstract concepts that are taught visually, which may lead to misunderstanding of new concepts.

A systems approach to the study of people with physical disabilities involves examining the dynamics that can drive development by examining the influence of the characteristics of the person, and of the environment that produces the behavior (Llewelyn & Hogan, 2000). One such model is the ecological model of human development by Bronfenbrenner (1994, 1999, 2005, 2009; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). that emphasizes the role of the environment, or context, as an influencing factor on the development and function of the human being (Reiter 2004). The direct relationship between a person and his or her immediate environment invites, permits, or inhibits engagement and interaction in the environment (ibid). Examples of such settings are school, close friends, family, and workplace (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

The physical environment of the school (for example, whether or not the environment is easy to navigate and free from obstacles, or whether or not the child's lighting needs are met in the context of a busy classroom) affects the quality of education. Factors such as the availability of resources and teachers' attitudes towards inclusion as well as school atmosphere and culture impact the inclusion of the student with VI in the institution (de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011).

Social interaction plays a crucial role in children’s social and academic development (Roe, 2008). In fact, improving social competencies not only has a positive impact on interpersonal skills and the quality of interactions children establish, but also on their academic achievement (Aviles, Anderson, & Davila, 2006).

Friendship, defined as a relationship that necessitates mutuality and long-term stability, has important functions in human development, and is a dynamic emotional and cognitive process that changes throughout life (Lifshitz, Hen, & Weisse, 2007). Friendship provides emotional resources (both for fun and for coping with stress) and also cognitive resources (for problem solving and knowledge acquisition). It also creates contexts in which basic social skills are acquired and extended (Dunn, 2004). Although friendship plays a crucial role during childhood, it seems to have a significant role also later in life, and specifically in enhancing the chances of academic success. In his model for student retention, Tinto (2006) posited that students who become socially and academically integrated into their campus communities complete college at higher rates than do students who do not integrate. The concept of integration and the patterns of interaction between the student and other members of the institution were found to be especially important during the first year of college, since it is a year that is marked by different stages of transition (Tinto, 2006).

The examination of the role of integration and patterns of interaction between students with special needs and the environment reveals that since youths with visual impairment are often overprotected by family members and service providers, they may not have developed the social skills necessary to integrate into the surrounding, seeing environment, and especially to the academic life (Hodges & Keller, 1999; Klinkosz, Sekowski & Brambring, 2006). Furthermore, individuals with VI may often feel uncomfortable discussing their impairment with their friends, and when they do establish a friendshi, the role that the impairment plays in that relationship can provide unique challenges for both members of the friendship dyad (Rosenblum, 2000).

Research suggests that college and university students with VI may suffer from social isolation, have fewer friends and inadequate social abilities (Garb, 2000) since many skills which are necessary for social interaction are based on visual cues.

The present study explored and analyzed the external factors that influence the learning of English as a foreign language and success in academic studies of students with VI, by employing the modified version of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model of human development. Specifically, the study analyzed the following external factors: parents, friends, teachers, and supportive teachers.

**Participants**

Twenty-eight university and college students defined as legally blind, agreed to participate in the study. All participants were in their first year of study. Of the twenty-eight students who took part in the study, nine were men and 19 were women. Students ranged in age between 20 and 42 Seven of the students were completely blind, while the rest were visually impaired.

**Procedure**

This study is qualitative and the tool used for data collection included interviews. Participants were told about the study purpose and design and consented to take part. They completed demographic questionnaires about their socio-demographic details, description of the impairment (age of onset, visual abilities etc.), educational background.

In the interview, participants were asked to describe their experiences in learning English both in school and as university students with VI. Interviews explored students' past learning experiences; the attitudes of parents and teachers towards them throughout the years; factors that they perceive as contributing to or hindering the learning process, especially in learning English; expectations and experience during their academic studies, such as contact with other students, tutors and lecturers and use of assistive technologies and provision of accommodations. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed.

**Findings**

Three central themes emerged from the interviews: 1. Family, 2. Friends, 3. School culture and the teacher.

**Theme 1: family**

In the present study, the family as a whole, and parents in particular, played a crucial role either in contributing or hindering the learning experiences of the participants with VI. some participants with VI associated their academic achievements with their parents' greater involvement in their studies and school experiences. Moreover, these parents often encouraged their children to overcome their disability and had high expectations and aspirations for their children. They often pushed the children towards excellence, and provided them with any additional aid or means in order to advance them in their studies. This was particularly true in the case of English, which was perceived as a significant tool in the child's integration in the academic and real world.

Ziv expresses her mother's involvement in her studies

"Ever since I was a little girl, my mother always pushed me to try harder. She never gave me any leniencies, and claimed that life may ‘deal some difficult cards’, and I need to learn how to get along in the world of sighted people. .

Miri attributes her academic success to her parents' encouragement and interest:

Since the school didn't really know how to handle having a blind student, my parents decided to give me additional tutoring, especially in English, since the fourth grade. They always encouraged me, and told me that I am no different from any of the other children. So, even at home, I had to take part in the household chores, even though I couldn't really see what I was doing.

Overall, the interviews indicated that parental and familial expectations both behavioral and academic, the advocacy of skills and efforts as well as providing a stable and caring home setting, fostered some participants' psychological and intellectual development, and promoted academic and personal growth. The overall picture that arises from the quotes mentioned above illustrates the importance of both moral and practical support in the educational achievements of students with VI.

**Theme 2: Friends**

In the present study some participants believed that they had age-appropriate friendships in which they were respected. They valued their friends, and attributed their social integration both in class and outside of school to the fact that they had close friends. Compared to parents, friends were less involved in assisting the participants in school. Nonetheless, the ability to form connections with others, especially in academic studies, contributed to their success. Some differences were found with regards to the type of close friends that the participants had. Some had close friends that were also visually-impaired, while others preferred to distance themselves from other visually-impaired individuals, and form close relations with sighted students.

Ness's boyfriend made the difference…

Ness and her boyfriend, Ilan, have been schoolmates since elementary school. While in high school, Ness and Ilan's relationship evolved romantically. At that point, Ness realized that he was not so different than she was in terms of intellectual abilities.

I finally understood that it's all a matter of attitude. He really motivated me to be better, and the longer I stayed with him, the more motivated I became… at first I decided to give up on English because I felt I could not deal with the difficulty of learning a foreign language. He didn’t give up on me, and he made me learn English in high-school. His influence was so great, that once I finished high school, I felt I could easily go to university, no problem whatsoever (smiling…)"

One of her classmates was a friendly and outgoing guy, and Inbal felt close to him, and wanted to be like him.

"I truly owe him. Without him, I would never have become who I am today. Thanks to him, I learned how to talk to people, express my thoughts and opinions. Once I met Danny, I learned how to form social ties, how to look people in the eye while talking, how to interact and be part of a group. Now, I was able to talk to the teachers, and ask for what I need, and get help whenever I encountered difficulties…I couldn't believe it, but I even insisted that they move me to the 5 point matriculation exam class in English. It’s funny, but when I graduated, I received an award for social excellence. He really changed my life for the better."

The interviews illustrate the importance of friends in making visually impaired individuals more accepted and helping them to be socially as well as academically successful. As previously mentioned, children need to engage in social interaction so as to maximize their social development. This is particularly true for individuals with vision impairment who often rely on interactions with others in order to overcome some of the visual access limitations they experience and in helping them make connections and develop their understanding of the world (Kef, Hox, & Habekothé, 2000). Thus, the support of peers can have important consequences for student wellbeing. Friends can help each other in encouraging each other to learn even a foreign language.

**Theme 3: The English teacher**

Examination of the various accounts revealed that a successful implementation of governmental policy depended to a large extent on the attitudes of the English teacher.

Tali's English teacher in high school motivated her to pursue her English studies at the university.

"When I started my English studies in fourth grade, I had a really bad English teacher in school…. Nothing stuck, it's as if I spent a whole year learning nothing… In 11th grade, a miracle happened, and a new English teacher came. A wonderful woman, and all of a sudden, it's like everything fell into place. She made me talk in English….and she also provided all the material in Braille, and examined me orally. I was completely shocked! This made a complete change in my abilities. All of a sudden, I could learn and understand English. Just for her…. I was accepted to a special program for visually impaired students, and spent a year in Philadelphia. Now I love English so much that I decided to study it as my major at university…"

Avishag blames her teacher's attitude for not knowing English

"I remember that most of my English lessons in elementary school I spent sleeping, and my teacher never said anything. She never tried to find out what was going on, not during or after the lesson… I remember a time when the principal was supposed to watch the lesson. That was the only time she talked to me, to prepare me. She told me that I have to participate in class. Indeed, when the principal came to class, I cooperated, and even answered some of her questions. I was shocked, however, that the minute the principal left the classroom, she dismissed me again as if I wasn't there.

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Positive attitudes of the teachers and willingness to assist the student with VI often resulted in positive school experiences and greater motivation for learning. For example,

Reut's experience in English classes was quite positive, especially in high school.

" Whatever I asked, she tried to accommodate…. She understood the need for enlarging the texts, and the oral aspect. It was very important to her to adjust to my needs, she was very caring and attentive.

On the other hand, negative attitudes in most cases led to feelings of frustration, humiliation and anger toward the teacher and the school as a whole. For example,

Alon's English teacher left him to take care of himself

"In elementary school, I remember being completely detached from studies… My English teacher told me that I should enlarge the class material by myself… sometimes I went outside to make a copy of the material and just stayed outside, not coming back to class. Apparently, nobody noticed that I never came back… I am angry, how can you expect a child in elementary school to take care of himself? She gave me the feeling that she preferred not to deal with me, never encouraging or focusing on my strengths

From the interviews it appears that student-teacher relationships greatly influence students’ learning of foreign language. A growing body of literature has documented the role that students’ feelings of belonging and the quality of their relationships inside the classroom has on the learning environment.

Ortal's high school English teacher pushed her to try harder…

"It was really easy to like her, she was really lovely. She believed me when I said it was difficult, she didn't think that I was trying to outsmart her, or make my life easier because of my disability. … Despite my disability, she never gave up on me. ", … I saw that my grades gradually improved, and that gave me the motivation to try harder, and eventually to believe that I can do it!"

Findings indicate that teachers who are emotionally attentive and responsive to the needs of their students may have greater impact on students' academic performance than the specific kinds of instructional methods chosen.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

Following Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of development, the development of a person is linked to the context, or environment, in which the person exists; an environment that is made up of nested systems ranging from *micro* to *macro* (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). According to the model, the *Microsystem* includes the relationship that an individual has with people in the immediate environment who participate in the life of the developing person on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time. These relationships between the developing individual and his or her immediate environment influence the engagement and interaction in the environment. Examples of such settings are school, closest friends, family, and workplace (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

This study examined the effect of external factors on the learning of English as a foreign language among visually impaired students. In particular, it investigated the impact of the immediate environment of the VI students such as family, friends, and English teachers on the ability to acquire a foreign language. The results are based on college and university students’ reports on these aspects in their lives.

The first external factor that was found to be of importance in influencing the learning experiences of students with VI was parents' attitudes and practical and moral support. In the case of individuals with VI, the perceptions and expectations that parents have about visual impairments can have a negative effect on the personal and social development of children with VI (Cimarolli & Boerner, 2005). Research indicated that parents of children with VI tend to expect less of them, which may lead to children's lesser accomplishments and slower development. Overprotection, over-assistance, denial, and negative parental attitudes may inhibit visually impaired children's development of initiative, independence, and realization of their abilities. In addition, research has linked the family's cognitive and emotional level of functioning with social and intellectual competence of the children, and it is this system that has the greatest influence on the personal and educational development of the child (de Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2010; George & Duquette, 2006).

From the students’ interviews it is evident that most parents followed the patterns described in the research literature, i.e. parents of children with VI treat the children differently than they do their sighted children. They are often unable to disregard the disability, and express feelings of anxiety and distress for their children. These perceptions and feelings often pervade their behavior and attitudes towards the children with VI leading to over-protectiveness and over-assistance. The parents regularly attempt to aid and keep their children from any discomforts or obstacles they might encounter due to their impairment, and even lower their expectations for their children. Thus, some participants claimed that despite the practical support provided by their parents, their parents' over-protectiveness and lower expectations, in fact, made the students feel as if their parents did not really believe in their abilities, and undermined their self-esteem and feelings of competency. This, in turn, had an effect on the motivation for learning and eventually their academic achievements as a whole.

On the other hand, some participants associated their academic achievements with their parents' greater involvement in their studies and school experiences. Moreover, these parents often encouraged their children to overcome their disability and had high expectations and aspirations for their children. They often pushed the children towards excellence, and provided them with any additional aid or means in order to advance them in their studies. This was particularly true in the case of English, where these parents perceived the study of English as a significant tool in the child's integration in the academic and real world. These results are in line with Bronfenbrenner’s model, according to which families, and parents in particular, define the development of the individual.

Another factor that was found significant in the success of students with VI in learning a foreign language was friends. Friends helped in making visually impaired individuals more accepted and helping them to be socially as well as academically successful. As previously mentioned, children need to engage in social interaction so as to maximize their social development. This is particularly true for individuals with vision impairment who often rely on interactions with others in order to overcome some of the visual access limitations they experience and in helping them make connections and develop their understanding of the world (Kef, Hox, & Habekothé, 2000). Thus, the support of peers can have important consequences for student wellbeing.

Close ties with peers influenced the ability of students with VI to learn a foreign language. While research indicates that individuals with VI often have fewer social interactions and fewer friends (Garb, 2000), the participants in the present study felt that the interactions they have with others are sufficient to be described as close friendship and in fact were helpful in dealing with their English studies as corresponding with Bronfenbrenner’s model.

The third factor found to be influential on the learning a foreign language among VI was the English teacher. Findings indicated that teachers play a crucial role in either contributing to or impeding learning among students with VI. The attitudes of English teachers played a significant role in the inclusion of the students with VI in class as well as in contributing to their academic success. Thus, positive attitudes of the teachers and willingness to help and assist the student with VI often resulted in positive school experiences and greater motivation for learning. On the other hand, negative attitudes in most cases led to students’ feelings of frustration, humiliation and anger toward the teacher and the school as a whole.

Research emphasized the association between teacher-student relationships and students’ engagement and involvement (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt & Oor, 2011). Specifically, studies pointed to the effect that teachers' expectations and treatment of the visually-impaired student have on the student's success or failure in class. Namely, teachers who embrace an inclusive philosophy and see beyond the disability often express confidence in the abilities of the visually-impaired student and attempt to capitalize on the learning strength of the student (George & Duquette, 2006). Moreover, in order to facilitate the successful inclusion of students with VI, teachers must exhibit flexibility in teaching methods and have positive attitudes toward students with disabilities and the inclusion of such students into regular classes (Sharma, Moore, Furlonger, Smyth King, Kaye, & Constantinou, 2010).

The relationship that develops between a student and a teacher can be a powerful motivator for learning (Newberry & Davis, 2008). Relationships with teachers may have an impact on students’ learning and academic achievement. In addition, students who are motivated to seek approval from their teachers may employ achievement-related behaviors to meet this goal. Finally, supportive relationships with teachers may enhance students’ motivation to learn and actively participate even in subject domains that have traditionally held little interest for them (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004).

There is growing evidence that perceptions of support from teachers throughout school also affect psychological adjustment. In an elementary school population, students who reported more positive bonds with their teachers obtained higher scores on self and teacher-reported social and emotional adjustment outcomes (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003). Teacher support also appears to influence psychological adjustment in older students. Students who attended middle schools that deliberately sought to promote teacher-student relationships tended to have fewer adjustment difﬁculties during the transition (Davis, Chang, Andrzejewski, & Poirier, 2010; Roorda, Koomen*,* Spilt, & Oort, 2011). Other researchers have emphasized the impact of positive teacher relationships on students’ social development, noting that this support assisted in children’s and adolescents’ development of not only academic and behavioral skills but also emotional skills. These ﬁndings suggest that teacher support can help to buffer some of the stress associated with school, offsetting the risk for adjustment difﬁculties (Cornelius-White, 2007; Davis, 2003; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Murray & Greenberg, 2001).

In school settings, students with VI use different media to access the curriculum, including large print, audio materials, and Braille (George & Duquette, 2006). Making the curriculum accessible to the student with VI is part of the teachers' responsibility, thus making the student with VI dependent on the teacher's guidance and help in class more so than the sighted students. As a result, the attitude of the teacher toward the inclusion of the students with VI in the regular class is extremely important in motivating and encouraging them. Teachers who embrace an inclusive philosophy and see beyond the disability often express confidence in the abilities of the visually-impaired student and attempt to capitalize on the learning strength of the student. They may also encourage socialization with peers through the use of cooperative learning strategies (Lee & Shute, 2010). This approach often results in greater social and emotional integration as well as the academic success of the student with VI.

All the above factors are even more salient in VI learning a foreign language. The VI student is not exposed to the language visually as other students through street signs, billboards, TV, and other media, therefore they mostly rely on the English teacher to mediate the language.

**Limitations**

This study consists of a small number of participants due primarily to the small number of students who are visually impaired within the high-educational system in Israel. The study involved students with VI thus the results cannot be generalized to the larger population of students with other disabilities. In addition, the subjects included more females than males which is not representative of the larger population. And although this study provides a good initial picture of the external factors impacting the learning of English among students who are visually impaired, a broader set of measures such as participating in extracurricular activities, might have provided additional insight into the students’ experience.

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