



COLECCIÓN CONOCIMIENTO CONTEMPORÁNEO

Educación 360: Emociones, tecnología, evaluación e inclusión en la era digital

Coords.

Carmen Romero García
Olga Buzón García

Dykinson, S.L.

EDUCACIÓN 360:
EMOCIONES, TECNOLOGÍA, EVALUACIÓN
E INCLUSIÓN EN LA ERA DIGITAL



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Dykinson, S.L.

2024



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EDUCACIÓN: EMOCIONES, TECNOLOGÍA, EVALUACIÓN E INCLUSIÓN EN LA ERA DIGITAL

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BRIDGING THE GAP: FOSTERING INCLUSIVE LEARNING FOR VISUALLY DIVERSE LEARNERS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

ANA-ISABEL MARTÍNEZ-HERNÁNDEZ
Universitat Jaume I / IULMA

1. INTRODUCTION

Equity, equality, and inclusion are fundamental principles of education and basic human rights, and thus they should not be disregarded (Vittello & Mithaug, 1998 in UNESCO, 2013; United Nations, 1948). In that regard, European and Spanish laws, as well as UN guidelines, aim to promote inclusion and participation of all students in the classroom (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2019; European Commission, 2003; European Union, 2012; Leenknecht, 2020). However, despite these efforts, full inclusion has not been achieved. Instead, mainstreaming has been implemented as a solution to promote inclusion, although this approach has led to a dilemma as it requires adaptations that can result in a hidden form of segregation (Wedell, 2005), and thus a less inclusive setting (Järkestig Berggren et al., 2016; Moriña Díez et al., 2015).

Historically, teaching practices have addressed disabilities in the classroom on a case-by-case basis. In other words, students with disabilities have often been seen as a problem that requires a reactive approach to accommodate their needs. However, higher education should shift towards a proactive approach (Moriña et al., 2020) that promotes inclusive practices and values all forms of human diversity without stigmatizing or excluding certain individuals. The goal should be to create a world of equal opportunities and democratise services, where disabilities are seen as a natural aspect of human diversity (UNESCO, 2017).

The pilot study hereby described seeks to analyse the status quo of visual diversity in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom in a Spanish higher education context. The study aims to identify social barriers for this collective in the higher education context in Spain, while emphasising the need for Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in the language classroom, with the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to provide multiple means of representation (Campoy-Cubillo, 2019; Hersh, 2020; McAndrew et al., 2012; Pennington, 2020; Rogers-Shaw et al., 2018). To that end, the study was conducted at Universitat Jaume I with the collaboration of the Diversity and Disability Unit for data gathering.

1.1. PREVIOUS STUDIES AND BACKGROUND

The literature on disabilities in primary and secondary education is extensive, while research on disabilities in higher education is limited due to the low representation of this group in this specific context (Bell et al., 2017; Fuller et al., 2004; Moriña & Carballo, 2017). Despite the existence of provisions and guidelines for an inclusive education system, research suggests that inclusion is not yet a reality, particularly in higher education institutions. However, the enrolment of students with disabilities in higher education is increasing steadily due to new legislation and provisions that ensure their rights (Fuller et al., 2004; Molina et al., 2016; Morgado, Cortés-Vega, et al., 2016; Slee, 2011; UN General Assembly, 2007). Nevertheless, some authors argue that segregative and discriminating methods are still in use, creating barriers to learning for people with disabilities (Bausela Herreras, 2002; Morgado, Cortés-Vega, et al., 2016; Moriña et al., 2020; Moriña & Morgado, 2018; Oliver & Barnes, 2010).

Research indicates that learners with visual impairments are increasingly using technology, such as screen readers, magnifiers, text-to-speech tools, and OCR technology, to access written texts instead of traditional Braille hard copies (García Villalobos, 2011; Kharade & Peese, 2012; Nisbet, 2020). In fact, not all visually diverse (VD, henceforth) learners are literate in Braille-reading depending on the timing of

sight loss (Martínez-Hernández & Bellés-Fortuño, 2021), which highlights the importance of using technology to provide equal access to knowledge for all students. Inclusive education studies have shown that the use of ICTs can democratise learning, and VD learners request their implementation in higher education settings (Morgado, Melero, et al., 2016). One of the most significant advantages of using ICTs is providing all learners, particularly VD learners, with more independence (Fuglerud, 2011). However, while the use of ICTs enables access to learning for VD learners, a study by Martínez Hernández and Bellés-Fortuño (2021), which discusses material adaptations for VD learners in the EFL classroom, found that further considerations are necessary when designing curriculum materials and assessment procedures. One of the recommendations included in the article for listening activities is to add extra pauses between questions or speakers to provide sufficient time for the text-to-speech tool to read out loud all the questions for the VD learner. Martínez Hernández and Bellés-Fortuño (2021) discourage text simplification in reading activities. Yet, they suggest it in listening comprehension activities although without any alterations to the oral text. These adaptations would ensure equal assessment to all learners (Martínez Hernández & Bellés-Fortuño, 2021). In contrast to the barriers that learners with visual disabilities might encounter, some authors suggest they might have an advantage in learning a foreign language due to their sensitive auditory channel, especially regarding grammar retention (Aikin Araluce, 2002; Coşkun, 2013). Nevertheless, others argue that sight plays a key role in language learning as it may help, for example, to discard noise to aid the learner discern two similar sounds in the foreign/second language (Georgiou, 2020). Furthermore, university students usually carry their laptops for note-taking purposes and students with a visual disability are no exception. However, in O'Hare and McTear's (1999) study, the authors noted that school students who used voice dictation for text input could produce text faster than with keyboard entry. This could be extrapolated to students at university level to promote Universal Design for Learning.

2. OBJECTIVES

2.1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research article aims to answer two fundamental research questions (RQ):

- RQ1: What are the perceptions and experiences of visually diverse learners regarding the accessibility of learning materials and methodology in the EFL classroom in a Spanish higher education context?
- RQ2: What are the challenges and barriers faced by visually diverse learners in accessing and participating in the EFL classroom?

By addressing these crucial research questions, this study endeavours to contribute valuable insights into the realm of inclusive education, with the ultimate goal of fostering equitable learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of visually diverse learners in the EFL context of Spanish higher education.

3. METHODOLOGY

This pilot study was carried out at Universitat Jaume I. The research utilised a quantitative method approach, namely a questionnaire, in order to collect data on the perspectives of VD learners' regarding EFL methodology and classroom dynamics in this context. The aim was to give voice to this collective, analyse their situation and examine their first-hand experiences, ultimately addressing the research questions posed above. The study spanned three years, encompassing both pre-Covid19 and pandemic-era data. This timeframe is crucial in the methodology, as the pandemic prompted a transition from traditional teaching methods to online formats. This shift significantly impacted communication and interaction between education stakeholders, which presented an opportunity to compare online and on-site modalities. Therefore, this study seeks to include the experiences of VD learners in EFL,

including the challenges or advantages encountered during the pandemic, where feasible.

3.1. DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

In this research study, the data collection process for the quantitative approach involved employing a structured questionnaire to gather numerical data from participants. To begin with, a series of meetings were arranged with the staff at the Diversity and Disability Unit at Universitat Jaume I. These work sessions served a dual purpose. Firstly, to enable the researcher to get acquainted with disabilities in the institutional context and understand the approaches taken. Secondly, to communicate the data requirements of the research to the Diversity and Disability Unit, allowing them to identify volunteers and supply the necessary data and connections. In that sense, the Unit facilitated contact with a tutor at ONCE, a Spanish acronym which stands for “National Spanish Organisation for Blind People” in English, with whom consultation video conferences were scheduled. These meetings contributed to some of the questions and survey design. Subsequent to the design of the survey, in order to ensure that the research complied with ethical guidelines, approval was sought and obtained from the ethics committee. Next, the Diversity and Disability Unit aided in volunteer recruitment for the study. The survey was then conducted to collect data from students with visual functional diversity. The questionnaire included different sections to solicit information related to (1) the students’ profile, (2) aspects of catering for special needs, (3) language skills and (4) how language learning was tackled during the pandemic.

The data collected for this study comprises the academic years 2019/2020 and 2020/2021. During the former (i.e., 2019/2020), the Diversity and Disability Unit assisted 410 users. Among the service users, the number of VD learners amounted to 14. During the latter, i.e., 2020/2021, the number of individuals who received the Diversity and Disability Unit’s services increased slightly, totalling 421. Only 3.5% of these individuals had a visual impairment, which corresponds to 15 people. Among them, nine were women, and six were men. Nevertheless, there was a variation in the degree of disability among users. In

the context where the study was conducted, a disability is attested by an official organism, namely Generalitat Valenciana (Real Decreto 412/2014, de 6 de Junio, Por El Que Se Establece La Normativa Básica de Los Procedimientos de Admisión a Las Enseñanzas Universitaria Oficiales de Grado, 2014; Fundación Universia, 2016). It is considered a disability when the sight loss percentage, in this case, is equal or higher than 33%. Table 1 provides a comprehensive breakdown, considering the percentage or degree of loss.

TABLE 1. Breakdown of VD users¹.

	Sight loss percentage	Total VD users	Male	Female
2019-20	33% - 100%	7	4	3
	0% - 32%	7	3	4
	Total	14	7	7
2020-21	33% - 100%	9	3	6
	0% - 32%	6	3	3
	Total	15	6	9

The data in Table 1, facilitated by the Diversity and Disability Unit, were used to determine the number of students that could potentially participate in this research. Subsequently, a survey was designed to collect the experiences of VD students. To comply with the EU General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) 2016/679, the Diversity and Disability Unit was responsible for circulating the questionnaire, as its staff members had access to the database and knowledge of the students' cases. Participants were contacted without disclosing sensitive or private information; as a result, all data collected from the survey was entirely anonymous.

3.2. PARTICIPANTS

For this pilot study, VD learners at the institution were contacted by means of two written messages, i.e., an invitation to participate and a reminder. The Diversity and Disability Unit at Universitat Jaume I was

¹ Information provided by Diversity and Disability unit at Universitat Jaume I.

in charge of sending these messages in order to comply with data protection laws and ethical regulations. Even though these were sent to all potential participants in order to recruit volunteers, only three students with visual functional diversity volunteered for the study, all of whom were female. It should be noted that the limited sample of students is due to the specific setting, which might limit the generalisability of the results of this pilot study.

3.2. SURVEY DESIGN

The survey was designed using *Qualtrics XM Platform*TM (Qualtrics, Provo, UT) and approved by the University's Ethics Committee. Initially, the questionnaire was written in Catalan, which is the preferred institutional language for communication among education stakeholders at Universitat Jaume I (Universitat Jaume I, 2021). However, to provide students with a choice, it was later translated into Spanish using the same platform. Even though this pilot study aims to analyse students' with visual functional diversity experiences in the EFL classroom, the survey was not offered in English to prevent frustration and stress among respondents who may not feel confident in the language, given that their level of English was not the object of study. Providing the questionnaire in English could have supposed an even lower participation rate, ergo the English version presented in this article was translated *a posteriori*.

In general, the survey administered to students included four blocks, comprising a total of 36 questions. However, the flow of the survey was dynamic, meaning that replies might condition which question would be shown next. Therefore, some questions or entire blocks could be obviated depending on the replies provided. As a result, the number of questions presented to participants varied depending on their choices. In any case, the survey was designed to last a maximum of 13 minutes in its longest version.

The first question was not a question *per se*, it was rather a welcome message inviting participants to take part in the research study, although the platform registered it as "Q1". It also provided information about the researcher, as well as details on how the collected data would be

processed. If the participant clicked on the start button to indicate their willingness to participate in the study, there were additional questions (i.e., Block 1) that were pertinent for statistical and demographic purposes, such as gender, age, year of study (i.e., 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th), and the primary building in which they attended most of their lessons. In order to determine candidates' eligibility for the study, a Yes/No question was included (i.e., Q6) which asked whether the participant had taken English, either EFL or ESP, as part of their degree program. If the participant had not taken the said subject, the questionnaire would terminate. However, if the response was affirmative, the platform would display the next set of questions (i.e., Block 2, see Table 3).

TABLE 2. *Student survey. Block 1: socio-demographic questions*

Question no.	Question	Choices
Q2	Gender:	Male Female Other
Q3	Age:	Between 18-19 Between 21-23 Between 23-25 Older than 25
Q4	Current year:	1st 2nd 3rd 4th
Q5	Faculty:	Faculty of Human and Social Sciences Faculty of Health Sciences School of Technology and Experimental Sciences Faculty of Legal and Economic Sciences
Q6	Have you studied English in your degree?	Yes No
Q7	The degree of disability recognised by official bodies is	Higher than 33% Lower than 33%

Moving on to the second block, the questions were designed to gather data on the behaviour of students and lecturers in the English classroom in the higher education context. First and foremost, it was crucial to include a question (i.e., Q8) about the assistance they received from the

Diversity and Disability Unit to collect their perceptions about the university's efforts to promote inclusion and equity. Another essential aspect was the inclusion of questions aimed at assessing the participants' attitude towards learning. This was deemed necessary to gain insight into their level of engagement in the subject matter and willingness to actively participate in the learning process (i.e., Q.9, Q16, Q17, Q18). In addition, questions 10-12 pertain to lecturers' responsibility in promoting engagement and participation. Table 3 below contains the questions for block 2.

TABLE 3. *Student survey: Block 2 – general questions*

Question no.	Question	Choices
Q8	Check all the options you consider. The Diversity and Disability Unit has helped you:	To inform teachers of your needs without having to intervene personally. As a point of connection and communication with the teachers to inform them of your needs for material and exam adaptations. To monitor the accessibility of the materials that the teacher sent you. To adapt from the Diversity and Disability Unit the materials to make them more accessible. To keep track of your progress during the academic year. Others:
Q9	Did you book attention hours with your English teachers to aid them meet your needs and specify the adaptations?	Yes No
Q10	In the English classroom, did the teacher adapt the materials to your needs?	Yes No
Q11	[If Q10: Yes] Which of these techniques were used for the adaptation of materials?	The font size on the notes was larger, so it was easier for me to read. The images used had alternative text. The titles were clearly indicated in style format so that the screen reader clearly identified them. No colour was used in PowerPoint notes or presentations. The virtual classroom was tidy and easily navigable. Others:
Q12	Did you need additional support and resources to take the course?	Yes No

Q13	[If Q12: Yes] Indicate which were those resources or additional support.	You requested the help of classmates in note-taking. You had a tutor who helped you at home. You have used specific software to convert the notes into an accessible format. You've spent time in the library and searching the internet to complete information because you didn't have time to annotate it in class. Others:
Q14	In the English class, the teachers adapted the way of teaching to your needs.	Yes No
Q15	[If Q13: Yes] Mark how the teacher adapted his/her methodology. "The teacher..."	described gestures when using nonverbal communication. avoided spatial references (here, there, this, here). read aloud what s/he wrote down while writing on the blackboard or on the screen. shared the presentations and the material s/he used for his/her lessons with me/the students in advance via the virtual classroom. Others:
Q16	[If Q13: No] Your teacher did not adapt the methodology. How did you react?	You stopped attending class. You contacted the Diversity and Disability Unit. You asked the teachers for adaptations to the methodology. You didn't do anything. Others:
Q17	Do you think you have been involved in English language learning?	Yes No
Q18	[If Q16: Yes] How did you get involved?	You asked for support materials to your teacher. You participated in the class. You performed teamwork. You communicated with classmates and faculty members.
Q19	[If Q16: No] How do you think you could have been more involved?	You could have asked the teacher(s) for support. The teacher(s) of the subject could have made you more involved in the classes. Teamwork would have made you feel more confident. You would have liked to have fluent communication with classmates and faculty.

The following questions posed to participants were in relation to language skills, including reading, listening, speaking, writing, as well as syntactic and lexical proficiency. The questions were based on the extensive literature and prior research on each skill, focusing on the potential obstacles that learners with functional diversity may face. The questions posed to VD participants drew upon several studies including those by Martínez-Hernández and Bellés-Fortuño (2021), Campoy-Cubillo (2019) and O'Hare and McTear (1999). These studies informed the design of the questions, with particular emphasis on VD students' listening skills. For example, the works of Martínez-Hernández and Bellés-Fortuño (2021) and Campoy-Cubillo (2019) proved especially helpful in this regard, as they highlighted the challenges faced by VD learners with significant sight loss who cannot read instructions and questions while listening to audio tracks. As both studies noted, these students often rely on screen-readers, which can only focus on a single aural input at a time (Martínez-Hernández & Bellés-Fortuño, 2021). In fact, questions included in Table 4 (i.e., Block 3) take into consideration different possible scenarios where two sensory channels operate simultaneously to decode language or complete an activity for sighted students, but VD learners rely only on one sensory channel, such as when using screen readers or text-to-speech tools to access questions of a listening comprehension task (Martínez-Hernández & Bellés-Fortuño, 2021).

TABLE 4. *Student survey: Block 3 – participants' skills*

Question no.	Question	Choices
Q20	In terms of listening comprehension in the English classroom, if the pace of the class is too fast for you and you don't have time to take notes what do you do?	You ask for repetition. Nothing, you will ask your classmates to pass you the notes later. Nothing, if it is important, it will be repeated. You ask the lecturer when the class has finished your doubts to complete the notes. You convene a meeting with your lecturer during attention hours.
Q21	In activities that involve listening to an audio track, do you have enough time to read the activity before listening to the audio?	Yes No

Q22	Sometimes, to practise speaking skills, we work with visual material to encourage debate. You have to do the oral task based on the visual material, like the rest of your classmates; what do you do?	There is nothing you can do because you do not see the support material well. You ask to increase the font size or image of the material in order to see it better. You ask your classmate for help to describe or read the material. Ask the lecturer to read or describe the material aloud to you so that you can do the task. It is not necessary to ask for help, as the lecturer has given very clear instructions and with a lot of description and detail. Others:
Q23	When reading a relatively long text in English in class, you find that:	You need more time than the rest of your classmates. You can read it in the same time span as your classmates.
Q24	Do you use any tool to read texts on the screen?	Yes No
Q25	[If Q24: Yes] In that case, do you need a larger font?	Yes No
Q26	[If Q25: Yes] Do you use the zoom-in tool?	Yes No
Q27	When you have to read texts from a photocopy distributed by the lecturer or collect it from the copy-shop, what do you do if you have to read it for the next class?	You scan the document at home or university for the text-to-speech program to read. You ask a classmate if he or she can read it aloud and record it with his or her mobile phone or computer. The tutor you have at home helps you. Your relatives read it to you. You ask for an accessible version to lecturers. The lecturer reads the text to you aloud. You use a device to enlarge the text.
Q28	In case you have to read the text during the class to do the next activity, what do you do?	You ask the teacher if they can upload the text in advance and in an accessible version in the virtual classroom to prepare it at home. You ask a classmate if he or she can read it aloud and record it. You ask the lecturer if they can read it aloud to you. Others
Q29	Did you have this subject during the national lockdown or at any point during the pandemic?	Yes No

This pilot study was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, and a few questions were added (see Table 5) to the survey in that regard to assess how learners with visual diversity adapted to the sudden shift to online learning. The study aimed to observe how lecturers adapted their teaching methods to cater to these learners' needs. The survey gathered learners' views on the methodology followed during the pandemic, the perceived level of difficulty of lessons, and the implementation of ICTs as an assistive tool. Finally, the survey collected learners' views on practising oral production and comprehension skills to examine whether all skills had been covered during the pandemic period.

TABLE 5. *Student survey: Block 4 – questions related to Covid-19 period..*

Question no.	Question	Choices
Q30	[If Q29: Yes = whole block of questions] Which was the preferred modality during the pandemic?	Synchronous Asynchronous
Q31	Think of the pandemic period. The lessons in Covid times were	Extremely easy A bit easy Neither easy nor difficult A bit difficult Extremely difficult
Q32	[If Q31: Extremely easy/a bit easy] Why was it easy?	Because you could organise your time and you did not have to follow the classmates' pace. Because the lecturers recorded the lessons and I could replay them as many times as needed. Because I could see what the lecturer wrote on the board much more clearly than in the brick-and-mortar classroom. Because you could have all the necessary tools at hand to follow the lesson. Others:
Q33	[If Q31: A bit difficult/extremely difficult] Choose the reasons why you found it difficult.	Because the lecturer assumed we could see what they were sharing but it wasn't compatible with my screen reader. The screen reader was constantly in action because my classmates typed in the chat box at the same time as the lecturer was speaking, so I couldn't hear what the lecturer said clearly. Because the font size on the shared lecturers' screen was tiny. Other:

Q34	As for listening comprehension, indicate which of these statements apply to your case.	No oral comprehension activities were performed during the pandemic. No oral comprehension activities were performed throughout the course, either during or before the pandemic. The lecturer shared the audio by videoconference and you performed the activities synchronously, as in the onsite classroom. The lecturer uploaded the audio in the virtual classroom and everyone did the homework in class - either on paper or through a virtual classroom questionnaire. The lecturer uploaded the audio in the virtual classroom and everyone did the homework outside of class hours. Other:
Q35	Which methodology would you have preferred?	That the lecturer shares the audio via GMeet and carry out the activities in a synchronous way, as in the onsite class. That the lecturer uploads the audio to the AV and that each student does the homework in class, but with the chance to replay the audio. That the lecturer uploads the audio to the AV and that everyone does the homework outside of class hours. Other:
Q36	Did you find any barriers in doing listening comprehension activities?	Yes No

To sum up, the survey aimed to gather learners' experiences in the inclusive higher education system before and during Covid-19 lockdown and subsequent restrictions. The study aimed to determine whether learners had equal access to knowledge and activities, both online and onsite, without facing any barriers.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. BLOCK 1 AND BLOCK 2 – SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC AND GENERAL QUESTIONS

The most relevant results of the student questionnaire, which provide valuable insights into the VD learners' experiences in higher education, will be analysed in this section. The distribution of the survey among

prospective participants by the Diversity and Disability Unit gathered three volunteers to participate in this pilot study, all of whom were female with a recognised degree of disability (i.e., 33% or higher). These learners not only used the Diversity and Disability Unit as a point of connection and communication with the teaching staff but also actively approached their lecturers to notify them about the necessary adaptations for successfully completing the modules. This shows a degree of agency regarding their future and willingness to complete the courses. Two of them considered that the course materials were accessible enough (i.e., larger font, organised virtual classroom for easy navigation). Nevertheless, one of them reported that the lecturer failed to implement adjustments to ensure the accessibility of materials, who needed to resort to external resources and aid to complete the course, such as classmates or private tuition. Based on these findings, it appears that lecturers employed limited methods to make materials accessible for visually impaired learners. This indicates a lack of adequate knowledge and resources to ensure that learning is accessible for this cohort. Moreover, they all concurred in stating that the methodology had not been adjusted. As a result, their participation in the English classroom may have been hindered, and they may have missed out on crucial information. In that regard, Q16 inquired about how students responded to not having the methodology adapted. When faced with lecturer inaction, the respondents chose to communicate their needs to the Diversity and Disability Unit or opted to inform the course lecturers.

4.2. BLOCK 3 – VD PARTICIPANTS' SKILLS

Research literature has highlighted the challenges faced by VD students in successfully completing various listening comprehension activities (Martínez-Hernández & Bellés-Fortuño, 2021). In this study, VD learners were asked about their approach when the pace of the lesson exceeded their typing skills in relation to note-taking. Sixty-seven percent of VD respondents prefer to have the information repeated to ensure they can complete their notes, or they arrange a meeting with the lecturer during attention hours. On the other hand, 33% of participants rely on their peers' notes or approach the lecturer after the lesson to

compensate for any missed information. The findings of the present study align with the research conducted by Martínez-Hernández & Bel-lés-Fortuño (2021). Their research highlights that VD learners require more time compared to their sighted peers when engaging with listening comprehension tasks, particularly when relying on text-to-speech tools instead of Braille. Similarly, respondents in this questionnaire unanimously agreed on the need for additional time. When inquired about speaking tasks that rely on visual prompts, VD respondents indicated their preference for read-aloud assistance from peers (67%) or teachers (67%). Additionally, if their sight allows, enlarging the font size is also considered an option (67%).

The necessity for adaptations in reading comprehension activities emphasises the importance of time accommodation, as indicated by the result. Regardless of whether they use text-to-speech tools or not, all participants reported requiring more time compared to their peers. Respondents who do not rely on read-aloud software stated that they do not need an enlarged font as they utilise the built-in zoom feature. In relation to reading in the EFL/ESP classroom, VD participants were asked about their actions when faced with the challenge of paper format. When provided with the text in advance, there was no hesitation among the participants. They unanimously sought assistance from the instructor, either for a read-aloud or to obtain an accessible version of the document. However, none of the VD participants in the survey chose an orally recorded version of the text. Having the text available in an oral format that can be accessed at any time can be advantageous in foreign-language learning, as the intonation and pronunciation of the oral text would be more natural compared to machine-read information. One-third of the respondents (33%) mentioned the digitalisation of the paper into a compatible format for software to read, such as OCR (Optical Character Recognition). Another 33% reported receiving help from a private tutor. On the other hand, when presented with a new text in class, all informants preferred avoiding this type of situation and would request access to texts in advance to be able to prepare them at home. Only 33% of the participants would ask the lecturer to read it out loud. Therefore, these results show that thorough preparation is

required from the lecturer to anticipate any possible barriers and facilitate materials in advance.

4.3. BLOCK 4 – QUESTIONS RELATED TO COVID-19 PERIOD FOR VD PARTICIPANTS

As stated above data during Covid-19 pandemic were collected, which encompassed the lockdown and “new normality” periods. Two participants took their English course during Covid, who reported completing it synchronously through real-time online sessions, instead of other asynchronous methodologies. Regarding listening comprehension tasks, one student stated that the methodology used in the online classroom was identical to what would have been used in an in-person lesson. This approach was deemed suitable and accessible by the student. In fact, it aligns with the preferred methodology indicated by the student in the survey. Conversely, other teachers omitted listening skills altogether in the course.

In terms of access to knowledge and equity among learners, VD students generally perceived that they were granted equal access. However, they considered that lecturers lacked some training in managing a diverse classroom environment, which, to their minds, should be a mandatory requirement for educators.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this pilot study investigated the experiences of VD learners in the EFL university classroom in Spain and aimed to address specific research questions to shed light on the challenges and perceptions regarding accessibility in this educational context. Regarding the first research question, the study revealed that VD learners face significant challenges in accessing and fully participating in their English language education. Despite some efforts by lecturers to make materials accessible, the adaptations remained limited, hindering their active engagement and potentially leading to information gaps. The second research question explored the challenges and barriers faced by VD learners in accessing and participating in EFL education. The findings highlighted

a lack of adequate adaptations in teaching methodologies, indicating a need for more comprehensive and inclusive approaches to cater to the diverse needs of visually impaired learners.

Overall, the findings of this study underscore the necessity for proactive preparation from lecturers to anticipate barriers and facilitate materials in advance, fostering an inclusive and accessible learning environment for VD learners in the EFL context. By addressing these challenges and implementing more comprehensive adaptations, educators and policy-makers can work towards promoting equitable opportunities and enhancing the learning experiences of VD learners in EFL university classrooms. This research study has also shed light on the pivotal role of technology as an ally for educational adaptations, as it was evident during the pandemic. Technology can enhance accessibility and support adaptive strategies, which is crucial to ensure equitable access to education. This research contributes valuable insights to the existing body of knowledge on inclusive education, aiming to empower educators and stakeholders to create a supportive and accessible space for all learners, regardless of their visual abilities. As the landscape of education continues to evolve, it is essential to address the needs of VD learners to foster a truly inclusive and equitable learning environment.

The study's results come with several limitations that must be considered when interpreting them. A larger and more detailed sample would have strengthened the accuracy of the findings. The research was confined to one higher education institution, limiting the generalisability of the results, although the same results can be corroborated in other studies. Moreover, the sample size was restricted to the field of English language teaching and learning, further narrowing the study's context. The limited number of VD students studying English presented challenges, as not all eligible candidates volunteered to participate. Furthermore, the study could have benefited from a mixed-methods approach in which to include qualitative data. The absence of learner interviews was unfortunate due to data protection laws. Interviews could have provided more in-depth information and prompted new questions for further exploration, as the questionnaire can be limiting in that regard. Nonetheless, the study considered the experiences and opinions of VD students contributing valuable insights to inclusive education. Future studies should delve further

at a larger scale into the experiences of learners with disabilities and faculty in charge of imparting lessons to a diverse audience.

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