

I cannot hear but you don't listen!
Unveiling Hard of Hearings Students' Experiences and Perspectives toward ELL

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored three hard of hearing student's set of beliefs, perceptions, and perspectives on their English language learning process in regular classrooms. The investigation follows an ethnographic case study design with participants with an age range of 18-25 years old. This inquiry identified a problem that seems to go unnoticed, the lack of understanding of the *hard of the hearing* individuals coping with an invisible disability that requires the support of communities. Hence, understanding the way in which hard of hearing people make sense of their schooling sheds light on classroom practices. The data comes from narratives, interviews and autobiographical writings that gather evidence of a personal dimension of experience and the relationship between their individuality and their social context. The author faced hearing loss since her childhood and had difficulties to fully access the information provided in teacher-centered classes. Although there is a good body of literature on pedagogy, very few works gather the students' perspectives. The findings fell in three dimensions according to the importance assigned by participants: *affective, communicative and attitudinal*. The Affective Dimension referred to the family, classmates and teachers' sympathy or lack toward their condition. Communicative, involved the participants' perception of communication with teacher, classmates, and self-perception of communication. Attitudinal, involved the perception of the attitude of teachers, classmates, and self-attitude towards EFL learning. Participants assessed support as crucial to success. As expected, reported that listening exercises and tests with loudspeakers did not help them understand; they felt it was unfair. In addition, some of their teachers did not make special arrangements, Findings hope to contribute to the understanding a complex aspect of English language learning and teaching.

Keywords: Hard of hearing, inclusion, understanding, strategies, attitude, communication.
Themes: Inclusive Education

Introduction

This study presents the exploration of the perspectives and experiences of a group of three hard of hearing participants toward English learning process as an attempt to understand the way in which they undertake the learning of a foreign language while dealing with a condition that implies multiple implications in terms of language, communication, and socialization. Through history, this condition has been poorly noticed and misunderstood. The impact of hearing loss is often underestimated, especially when it affects around 362 million people in the world, and many others deny having it, entailing problems in the personal relationship, communication, isolation, likewise, depression and anger.

The motivation for carrying out this work is to contribute to the understanding of Hard of hearing condition in the context of English language regular classrooms since the perspectives of individuals and the interpretation that as student, English teacher, researcher and Hard of hearing the person I can provide. My personal experience as a Hard of hearing person differs from the three participants of this study. I received my diagnosis in adolescence, and they in their childhood. My high school and college instruction took place always in regular classrooms without any support. I obtained the first hearing aids at the age of 24. Nowadays, in times of rights for minorities and disabilities, communities should no longer ignore HH condition. This project reveals the condition from three voices that struggled with adaptation, exclusion, and disrespect, as I did myself.

Problem statement

This study derived from the identification of a social problem that seems unnoticed, the lack of understanding of Hard of the hearing condition (hereafter H/H) in regular English classrooms. H/H is hardly evident; it is considered one of the invisible disabilities as it is not apparent as other special disorders and implies damage in the hearing capacity in different levels and frequencies. Many people facing it deal alone with the implications of the condition to be socially accepted, trying to adapt to the social requirements with a high level of difficulty, without the support or consideration of other members of the communities in which they often participate in an attempt for fitting the hearing society.

In this sense, the lack of understanding of HH condition at English regular classrooms implicates a genuine problem because represent the segregation of a population that requires support and adjustment in order to access to the knowledge, especially, when it comes to learn a foreign language in which the difficulties to understand the words increase, so that the lack of support causes disadvantages. The first step to developing authentic inclusive dynamics is through the recognition of the implications that go beyond the medical perspective but involves social, effective, communicative, cultural issues informed from the voices of individuals facing it through experiences and perspectives that they have.

Research Objectives

General objective

To understand the way in which hard of hearing people make sense of English language learning.

Specific objectives

- To explore the perspective of a group of hard of hearing students about English language learning
- To identify the differences and similarities in the perspectives of the participants

Research question

How do hard of hearing students make sense of their English language learning process?

Type of study

This research obeys to the qualitative paradigm as Rebojli (2013) states that "Qualitative research is characterized by an interpretative paradigm which emphasizes subjective experiences and the meanings they have for an individual" (p.30). The aim of this study is the exploration of the experiences and meanings of a group of HH as an ethnographic case study. Naidoo (2012) defines ethnography as "(...) a qualitative methodology that lends itself to the study of the beliefs, social interactions, and behaviors of small societies, involving participation and observation over a period of time, and the interpretation of the data collected" (p.1). Thus, ethnography fits the orientation of this research, in terms of the observation, analysis, and understanding of the individuals. In concordance, Meza (2013) explains that:

An emic description of a certain habit of the populace of a place would be based on how the members of that society explain the meaning and the reasons for that custom. On the other side, the description of etic is a description of the observable facts by any researcher, devoid of any attempt to discover the meaning that the agents involved provide. (p.91)

This definition is necessary as an ethnographic study involves assuming a perspective for the analysis so then, both emic and etic perspectives were considered to interpret the data collected, taking into account the meaning that the subjects give to their own experiences, but also the participant observation to contrast the data expressed with the observed. Furthermore, Rebojli (2013) explains that "A case study is a comprehensive description of an individual case and its analysis; the characterization of the case and the events, as well as a description of the discovery process of these

features that is the process of research itself”(p.31). So then, this research explores multiple cases describing the individualities, contrasting differences and similarities, interpreting the experiences, meanings, and beliefs that may contribute to the figure out the way to support the learning process, and exploring how these individuals make sense of their ELL process.

Participants

This study worked with a sample of three hard of hearing participants with different loss level whose ages are about 18 to 25 years old. The work had the support of Media Global IPS, an institution that lends solutions for hearing and balance needs in order to facilitate communication processes. The participants felt motivated to take part in this investigation, in order to tell their experiences learning the English language while facing hearing loss.

Body Knowledge

In order to contextualize this revision, it is imperative describing the HH in contrast with deafness. According to MEN (n.d.) deafness is a: “Hearing impairment so severe (greater than 90 decibels) that the student is unable to process linguistic information through the ear, with or without amplification, which may adversely affect their academic performance” (p.6). This definition implies that the boundaries of deafness and H/H are related to the decibels. Also, in the definition of hearing loss provided by MEN (n.d.) as “Impairment in the hearing, which may adversely affect the student's educational performance, but which is not included under the definition of deafness” (p.6). For instance, in the delineations expressed by MEN, the main difference between deafness and hearing loss is the decibels or residual audible range capacity, establishing delimitation in the identity of a deaf and an H/H person from the loss level that they have and, if this allows amplification through aids and devices. Conversely, it is crucial to emphasize that the identity is a personal construction that depends on a great extent in the way in which the person identifies himself. Still, the needs for deaf and H/H people are diverse as its implications, so the individual characteristics have to be explored.

The literature reviewed explored the perception of educators (Dogmala, 2013), (Dogmala et al, 2016), (Szymanski et al, 2013), (Diaz & Cubillos, 2014) of parents (Guiberson, 2014) and hard of hearing people's perception of identity (Kemmerly, 2015). However, there is a gap in the literature on studies that present the perspectives and voices of HH learners about ELL. For this reason, this study focused on the perspectives and experiences that HH have about their own condition, implications, feelings, emotions, beliefs, in order to explore the way in which they conceive ELL in an attempt for understanding it within English regular classrooms. Exploring the perspectives of the sample of the population was determinant to evidence the way in which they conceive their English learning process at regular classrooms. This exploration, made possible to identify some critical points to reflect when teaching English to HH students:

Firstly, The core implication evidenced is the useless of track for teaching listening to HH students, especially when this material is not authentic. In order to evaluate listening skill, it is necessary to use another kind of material such as videos of real conversation in which they have the opportunity to see the speakers, the context of the conversation and their body language. Hearing aids have a limitation for the discrimination of speech from tracks or loudspeakers, however, although a video is reproduced through similar machinery, the images and visibility of the speaker improve the understanding. The teacher needs to select the correct material to facilitate the learning process.

Secondly, the communication in the classroom needs to start with making conscious to teachers and classmates of the way in which they can facilitate HH understanding of the speech, it includes, talking clearly, pause between sentences, repeating, rephrasing and writing it is necessary. The noisy environment may almost impossible discriminating speech, hence, it would be crucial adapt the classroom isolating noises from the outside, promoting the silence and respect when someone talk, organized participation, monitoring that the HH students understood the information. Furthermore, while teaching the lessons is mandatory to stand in front of the classroom, in a visible position and proximity for the HH students, try do not move too much in the classroom insofar possible.

Third, Teacher must avoid moving frequently around the classroom, and try to keep in mind maintaining a short distance insofar possible with the student. Although the student develops ways and strategies to access the information, it is also the teacher role to facilitate the learning process, analyzing ways of supporting and monitoring student process. Also, whispering may be impossible to understand for HH students, so avoiding explanations by whispering it is fundamental. Fourth, in terms of socialization, the teacher needs to demonstrate the interest for their needs with the correct attitude as integrating HH students with classmates starts from the understanding of the condition and providing opportunities to interact positively.

Finally, the evaluation needs to be differentiated but not exempted. HH students also require developing listening skill through significant activities and being evaluated in a way adapted to their needs. As it was mentioned before, the use of the track and even when it is still so common in English classrooms needs to be ruled out. Instead, videos, authentic material, real conversations in the classroom can be much more useful for both HH and regular learners.

Findings

Finding No. 1 HH students conceive English language learning as a process in which they must face a lot of difficulties that can be easily eliminated with some adjustments and support of their teachers, classmates, institutions and their self-commitment. The adjustments required may also benefit to regular students in terms of more meaningful and contextualized language input through authentic material and real conversations. In addition, the students also find strategies to access the knowledge, increase their autonomy and feel they can achieve successfully the goal of learning a foreign language at a regular classroom.

Finding No. 2 HH students can take part in regular English classrooms developing normal processes nevertheless, the support is necessary to facilitate the struggle of this student for full access to the knowledge and opportunities. Moreover, the understanding of HH needs by all the educational community. The participants displayed high expectations of their capacities despite the obstacles.

Finding No. 3 The use of audio tracks is unmeaningful for teaching or testing listening skill in HH students as result in a misperception of the student's abilities to communicate in English, due to any hearing aid is useful for decoding words produced by devices. These recordings material also does not fit real-life conversations. Instead, HH reported that audiovisual material and alive conversations in the classroom are more appropriated for developing listening skill and for assessment.

Finding No. 4 HH students are affected by teachers, classmates and institution attitudes toward their special condition, even though, they have the motivation to surpass the obstacles, the support, the adjustments, and understanding of the community in which they interact is determinant for success because coping alone with the implications increase the anxiety that subsequently, affect the speech comprehension

Conclusion

The inclusion does not involve excluding HH students of presenting English exams or excluding them from presenting listening sections, but adapting because as any other subject listening is needed, conversation requires listening, real life require it, but people often confuse hearing and listening as the same word. Listening goes beyond perceiving sounds but the ability of the brain to interpret and make sense of the sounds, in terms of meaning, attitude, affectivity, body language, and context. We can hear with the ears, but we listen with the eyes and the brain, all of us to understand require analyzing the environment, the face expression, the way in which people talk to us, the tune voice, the behavior, the movements, the place and the moment. Even, while reading we are listening to the author voice, when we try to comprehend to someone we are listening with our soul, there are many ways to listen Hence, the inspiration to develop this work is not to say you that HH cannot hear well, but say to you that you need to listen more.