



RESEARCH PAPER

**The Effectiveness of the Sighted Teachers' Use of Deictic Expressions for Blind Students in Mainstream Classrooms Having Majority Sighted Students**

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PAPER INFO

**Received:**

February 08, 2022

**Accepted:**

April 10, 2022

**Online:**

April 15, 2022

**Keywords:**

Blind Students,  
Deictic  
Expressions,  
Inclusive  
Classrooms

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The main objectives of this study are to shed light on the difficulties of visually impaired students regarding deictic markers in inclusive classrooms and to inform the teachers' community how effectively they can teach such students. Not much research has been done on this subject, therefore, lack of information regarding special needs of visually defective students creates hurdles for them in getting education. The main idea is that as deictic markers rely mostly on visual cues then how a visually defective student can grasp these markers with equal informativeness. Semi-structured interviews of eight visually impaired students were conducted who were pursuing their education in different universities of Pakistan. More or less all the participants voiced this observation that they have to face a lot of problems in inclusive classrooms due to the use of deictic markers. This study recommends that professional training seminars should be organized to improve the skills of the teachers in tackling such classrooms where visually impaired students are also present.

**Introduction**

Deictic expressions are frequently used in our day-to-day lives and they are universally present in all languages (Levinson, 2004). We normally pay very little attention to them but most of the time we are using them unconsciously; classroom is not an exception. In classroom as well, the teacher employs the same strategies of using deictic expressions to refer to persons, places or time. But there is one further aspect to the universality and comprehension of these deictic markers. Deictic markers are not only linguistic items but they also rely on the visual ability to comprehend them. The utterance in which deictic term is used becomes vague by the absence of a Paralinguistic gesture (Levelt, Richardson, & La Heij, 1985). "deictic expressions always communicate much more than is said" (Yule, 1996, p.16). A pertinent question arises regarding the comprehension of this 'much more said' if one lacks the sense of sight? The review of existing literature on this topic reveals that this aspect of deictic expressions rarely received attention, therefore, the current study aims to bridge this gap.

According to Yule (1996), "Any linguistic form used to accomplish this 'pointing' is called a deictic expression. When you notice a strange object and ask, 'What's that?', you are using a deictic expression ('that') to indicate something in the immediate context" (Yule, 1996, p.9). The words "linguistic form", "pointing", "indicate something", and "immediate

contexts” are of central importance. As mentioned earlier, deictic expressions are not “linguistic forms” alone but also depend heavily on visual ability to observe the “immediate context” which is “pointed” to “indicate something”. As the visually impaired can’t observe the ‘immediate context’ using his visual abilities in which he is obviously lacking, then how he may be able to comprehend this ‘pointing’ and can get the idea that which thing is referred to? Eye-sight is a vital sense and its absence renders life difficult for visually impaired people as compared to people having this ability (Murad et al., 2011).

### Types of Deixis

There are three basic types of deixis or deictic markers. They are given as follows:

**Table 1**  
**Types of Deixis**

Types of Deixis	Function	Implications for blind students
Person	It refers to persons such as ‘me’, ‘you’, etc.	Difficult to comprehend
Temporal	It refers to time such as ‘now’, ‘then’, etc.	Easy to comprehend
Spatial	It refers to places such as ‘here’, ‘there’, etc.	Difficult to comprehend

### Deictic expressions: a Source of Embarrassment

Visually impaired persons cannot even judge that by ‘you’ they are addressed or someone else. This inability is the reason that whenever they are addressed by using deictic markers they remain silent thinking that someone else is addressed. Similarly, by using spatial deictic markers to refer to something such as a teacher after writing something on board and asks his students ‘is this correct?’ then can anyone comprehend what he meant by ‘this’ without looking at board? If no, and certainly no then what will be the situation of a blind student who lacks the ability to look at anything including whiteboard in order to tell what’s ‘this’? undoubtedly such markers embarrass the blind students and as a consequence, the sense of inferiority engrosses them entirely.

Deictic expressions are explained in terms of a deictic centre. Deictic centre is the place and time of the speaker. From this deictic centre, the deictic expressions takes on its meaning. Due to this deictic centre, the deictic markers such as ‘this’, ‘now’, ‘here’ are termed as proximal deictic markers because they are proximal or closer to the deictic centre. On the other hand, ‘that’, ‘then’, ‘there’ are termed as distal deictic expressions which are used to refer to things, time and places away from the deictic centres. In case of a visually impaired student, both proximal and distal deictic markers create confusion. First of all, they are not certain of the exact location of deictic centre and when they with the passage of time observe the deictic centre then they are not sure of the persons and things in the close proximity of this deictic centre. In case of a classroom, when teacher is the deictic centre and the teacher is walking in the class while lecturing then this deictic centre is not static and this ‘moving deictic centre’ creates more confusion as it takes time for the blind student to acquaint himself with the exact location of the teacher. Thus any deictic markers used in reference to this moving deictic centre, proximal or distal is surely an annoyance in comprehension.

Deictic expressions are easily understandable by people at present but for those who are not present there, translation of deictic expressions are required (Yule, 1996). This fact only takes account of those people who are present and are sighted. Those people who are present but visually impaired or blind, they have not been considered in this statement by Yule. For them too, an explanation should be furnished. By this requirement, the blind students are present but absent. They are there but need an elucidation to understand like

those who are not there. In the absence of such elucidation, they may not comprehend the lecture properly. For instance, Yule has given the example: "I'll put this here" (Yule, 1996, p.9). He has given this example to show that the people who are present will be able to understand easily that this talk is about Jim saying to Anne that an extra house key is placed in the kitchen drawer. But the point which Yule has missed is that what if the person present is a blind man who can't see the pointing target of 'this' and 'here' in this example. For him too, like a person who is not present there, the explanation is required. The explanation which will clearly tell him that by 'this' what is meant and by 'here' which place is referred.

Deictic expressions are very complex system of pointing in which continually one term changes to another and vice versa. For instance, in a conversation 'I' changes swiftly to 'you' and 'you' becomes 'I' very quickly. In some cases, as in a classroom, 'you' changes swiftly, and is targeted towards different persons so it's hard to comprehend that by 'you' means person A, B or C or someone else.

### **Use of non-familiar Social Deixis for familiar persons**

One other important observation in this regard is that social deixis are not only used for person having higher status or elder in age by blind people but they also use them until they are not sure about the person that who the person is actually. They tend to use social deictic expressions to avoid embarrassment. They always use non familiar social deictic markers unless they are sure about their addressee which often happens after a discourse in which they recognize the voice of their addressee. For some close acquaintances, they recognize them by just a word of them but for distant acquaintances they take some time and listen to their discourse to recognize that the addressee is familiar or stranger. Till then they stick to the non familiar social deictic markers. The shift of social deictic markers of non familiarity to familiarity takes place the moment they recognize the person. So, in some cases they address familiar persons with non familiar deictic markers because they are not sure whether the addressee is the familiar person or some stranger. It all happens because they lack the visual ability of recognition which is an important factor in selection of deictic markers.

### **Proximal and Distal Spatial Deixis: Alike for the Blind**

Children learn spatial deixis in reference to their visual capabilities. If a thing is in their visual range, they understand it as proximal spatial and if it's no longer in their visual space then it's considered distal spatial deixis. As Yule (1996) describes these spatial deixis in terms of visual space then a question arises what about those whose visual space does not exist at all. Then for them both near and distal are alike because they can't see.

### **Literature Review**

Hanks (2005) wrote an article in which he considered deictic markers not only linguistic form but also considered bodily postures, gestures and gaze in deictic expressions. He emphasized that these deictic markers are present in all languages of the world. He further added that this type of communication is characteristically different from other verbal and non verbal form of communication and is more interesting to study. He later on described the deictic markers in a language Yucatec Maya. He explained the informativeness of deictic markers for people involved in conversation.

Awan, Malik, & Khan (2012) alleged that by rehabilitating their blindness affected public, Pakistan can achieve great economic benefit and it will not cost much to initiate a rehabilitation program for the blind. Only attention is required towards this issue. 85.5% people who are blind in Pakistan are blind due to avoidable causes (Jadoon et al., 2006) but this issue is not on the preference list of health organizations.

Beck-Winchatz & Riccobono (2008) stressed that like sighted students, many blind students are also keen in pursuing their studies in science, engineering, technology and mathematics but they face opposition due to lack of teachers' training and the deficiency of accessible alternative description of graphical objects in these disciplines and such hurdles obstruct the ways of these talented blind students.

In 1960s, America has seen the shift from exclusive schools for visually handicapped to inclusive education of those who have sight and those who lack it. Due to this trend, capable visually impaired students are incorporated in sighted classrooms. For this purpose Bunner&Bunner(1968) have written down an article in which guidance are provided to those teachers who have no experience of teaching blind students along with sighted students in a class collectively. They asserted that blind students also have the same interests as other students. In public schools, normally the mode of teaching and teachers' methodology is visually oriented whereas blind students rely on auditory and tactual learning. Teachers who do not know how to teach students other than through visual basis encounter certain problems while teaching blind students. They mentioned that biology is in the grasp of visually impaired students and the purpose of their article is to give practical suggestions to those teachers who lack experience in this regard. They further mentioned that which activities blind students can easily perform and should not be exempted from those activities which they can perform easily and they also mentioned the special equipment which is helpful in teaching blind students. They also mentioned how blind students take notes and shed light on the advantages and disadvantages of three main ways through which blind students normally take notes. Furthermore, they acknowledged that generally people think of biology as working through microscopes and dissection of frogs and bar visually impaired students from studying biology. This is totally wrong because biology is not just that and there are many things which a blind student can do easily in biology. Due to their experience, the researchers of this study want to expand their endeavour to all classrooms and want to explain that on majority only deictic markers create confusion. Teachers by avoiding these markers can make many different subjects, like biology, as a subject in the grasp of visually impaired.

Freire, Linhalis, Bianchini, Fortes, & Maria da Graça (2010) have shed light on the challenges faced by educators in the process of inclusion of blind students in E-learning classes. They considered interactive whiteboards as one of the hurdles in the inclusion of blind students in sighted classrooms. They suggested a solution and implemented it in a distance learning classroom and through a case study concluded that the provision of annotation to the blind student through a mediator has enabled the blind student to easily read the text written on the whiteboard using his screen reader. The results of this study are very encouraging. They transcribed the feelings of teacher and student on the implementation of this accessible approach and both found it quite comforting. Similarly, the goal of the current study is to aware the teachers that by a slight improvement in their teaching strategy they can make their classrooms accessible for the blind students as it has become accessible in E-learning classrooms using description for the visual elements.

Kruger (2010) has expounded that the iconic element of films pose great difficulty for blind audience in comprehending the film. He has emphasized that the whole narrative of films should be re-narrativized by audio describers in the way that the narration should use such linguistic devices which could be able to completely cover the effects achieved through camera techniques and specific angles through which the visuals are shown.

Healy and Fernandes (2011) pointed towards the dearth of literature on the strategies to include students with special needs in regular classrooms. They gave many suggestions to mathematics teachers in this regards. Similarly, Bishop and Rhind (2011) investigated the barriers and enablers faced by visually impaired students at a university in

Britain. They identified four main categories of problems which visual impaired students faced and explained how the visual impaired students, their parents, teachers and the university administration in synergy can remove those barriers. These four categories were student's attitude, institutional provision, external support, and others' attitude.

After reviewing the relevant literature, the current study has been presented in this wide backdrop. Semi-structured interview technique has been utilized for this research project because it is not fully fixed and allows timely interventions in the interview session. This type of interviewing is seen as 'flexible' mode of interviewing (O'Leary, 2004).

## **Material and Methods**

Qualitative method has been employed for this study. The tool of data collection has been semi-structured interviews. The participants have expressed their viewpoint regarding the usage of deictic markers in sighted classrooms. Fifteen questions have been asked in the interview.

The sample has been selected on the basis of the convenience of the researchers. It's a convenient sample of eight blind participants. They belong to different parts of Pakistan and have pursued different types of education. Their qualification ranges from BS-English 2nd semester to M.Phil Linguistics 2nd semester. Out of eight participants, two are the students of Karachi University (K.U.), two are from Government College University (GCU) Lahore, one belongs to Quaid-e-Azam University Islamabad (Q.A.U.), one belongs to National University of Modern Languages (NUML) Islamabad, one is from University of Management and Technology (U.M.T.) Sialkot campus, and one belongs to Bahauddin Zakariya University (B.Z.U.) Multan.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Findings**

#### **White-board and Multi-media based lectures**

White-board based lectures are more difficult to grasp because some teachers do not read at all, while others read only a few points. One interviewee in connection of this situation stressed, "This situation is better than the situation I confronted when I was in school but still this situation is not satisfactory". In lectures delivered using multimedia, the findings suggest that teachers mostly read the slides aloud and did not make use of much deictic expressions. Unlike text, if a picture is displayed on the multimedia, then majority of teachers considered deictic markers suffice for that and did not bother to explain it in words.

#### **Transformation in Teacher's Teaching Methodology**

Transformation in teaching methodology of their teachers has been realized by majority of the research participants. Majority of the teachers gradually realize that deictic markers alienates his/her visually impaired students so, a paradigm shift is observed in their teaching style. They try to use elaborate references instead of deictic markers.

#### **Psychologic Impact of Deictic Markers**

In the absence of any supplementary explanation, the impact of deictic markers alone in sighted classrooms is very much negative on the visually impaired students. "If deictic markers are not explained, a frustration and a sense of deprivation develops in visually challenged" Was the opinion of one of the respondents. Lack of explanation also reduces their comprehension of the lecture. This inability to imbibe knowledge properly

with other peers contribute to this fact that many visually challenged students are less likely to compete with their sighted counterparts on equal basis in various examinations.

### **Gender of Teacher**

Female teachers response towards visually impaired students' needs is more impressive than that of their male colleagues. Five of the eight participants experienced that they never had to remind a female teacher that she should use elaborate references instead of deictic markers. An interviewee vividly described this situation in these words, "It always cheered me up when female teachers of mine instead of using deictic markers used clear expressions and always bothered to notice whether I was getting the point".

### **Discussion**

Richardson & Roy (2002) suggested that the dropout rate of visual impaired students is relatively higher due to lack of facilities provided to them by the higher education institutions. Institutions where facilities such as accessible handouts are provided to the visual impaired students, the educational attainment of these students is almost equal to that of their sighted peers. In other words, the poor grades of visual impaired students are reflective of the fact that proper facilities are not provided to them and this failure can not be attributed to their visual impairment. They further recommended that the higher education institutes should not have any qualms while admitting the visual impaired students because they can perform well like other students provided that the institute cooperate with them and understand their problems and should strive for the resolution of such problems.

In this study, the researchers observed that the majority of the participants think that teachers do read when they are writing on board and do not just rely on deictic markers. But there is a difference between the extents of reading. The extent ranges from reading everything to reading only the keywords. The difference in school and university teachers is also visible by analyzing this statement that most school teachers do not read as required whereas on Majority University teachers read what they write on board. As far as multimedia Power Point presentations are concerned then here too the trend is similar. Teachers do read while presenting the slides but in this case majority complained that teachers only read keywords and headers and their skipping of words and sentences creates a gap in the understanding level of blind students. About describing pictures, most teachers do not bother to describe pictures for blind students and they just rely on the deictic markers. Students have to get the help of their friends or family members to understand the pictures. While using deictic markers teachers often forget that there is some blind student in the class as well. Teachers who have experienced blind students in their student life or in their teaching career transform their lecture from the first day. Those who have a natural disposition to help blind students they also transform their strategy to fulfil the special needs of blind students. Only those teachers do not transform their strategies who are either not aware of the problems and the solutions of these problems of blind students or those who are inconsiderate. Some people have a natural disposition but it takes one or two weeks for them to finally select the best strategy to help their students so that their students are not baffled by deictic markers. The blind students face great confusion in the class. It is a natural consequence of not explaining deictic markers to them. Majority of the research participants confirmed this conviction that when a teacher does not explain deictic markers then the level of confusion is very high. This confusion can be mitigated by a number of ways. First and foremost is that teachers should establish a good relationship with their students so that their students can easily talk to the teachers about their problems. Secondly is that teachers should always explain the deictic markers for the blind students and use elaborate reference systems instead of deictic markers where it is possible. If excessive deictic markers are used then comprehension affects a lot. In very rare cases comprehension of the

lecture remains above fifty percent. The more the teachers explain the deictic markers the more comprehension level is closer to 100 percent. When such deictic markers are used then it automatically reminds the visually impaired student that he is visually challenged. Because he is visually challenged that's why he is unable to understand deictic markers.

In some cases, deictic markers lead to irritation while in others it leads to pessimism and anger. When deictic markers are used and everyone in the class is enthusiastically taking part and the visually challenged student is kept quiet and even teacher does not notice his silence or does not realize from his face that he is in utter confusion then this feeling of isolation grows stronger. Majority participants mentioned that they are addressed in the class by their names which creates a nice feeling in them. If someone addresses them with deictic markers and they are unable to guess that they have been addressed and someone else tell them that they have been addressed then this creates embarrassment in them. That's why they suggested that teachers should remember the names of the visually handicapped students to save them from embarrassment due to their lack of understanding of deictic markers which involve visual faculty as well to comprehend. A sizable majority of the research participants confirmed this conviction that female teachers are more well aware and sympathetic towards the special needs of blind students regarding deictic markers. As these incidents are so common in which blind students are deprived of explaining the deictic markers so most of the time their conscious mind is not able to think of any such instance but it is true that they are so frequently occurring in the classrooms and outside the classrooms as well that blind students have learnt to put up with these problems. They do not complain because they think that they are lacking in one crucial sense that's why they are at loss in understanding and there is no fault of the teacher in it that they are not able to understand the deictic markers. In fact, they are missing the point that ideally a teacher is trained to teach a class full of different students in which some students learn best through listening, some best at seeing, some best at performing and so on so and like other students blind students are also a type of students whose preferable mode of learning is not sight and the teacher should help them in their study problems. Mostly teachers show a positive reaction toward the questions and requests of blind students to explain deictic markers but exceptions exist here too. Some teachers always remember the strategies which are best to teach blind students while others forget. Some participants think that it is the responsibility of the blind student to always remind the teacher that he has the special needs and deictic markers should be explained to him whereas some other participants think that blind student should increase his confidence level and should always remind the teacher that he has the special needs. There is one important point to make: students who are in their early semesters are by nature shy, blind or otherwise. So, always expecting from a blind student to speak for his special needs is not possible. At some times teachers and at other times blind students should take steps to bridge the gap and should collectively achieve the goal which is to make the deictic markers equally informative for the blind students as well. All the participants agreed that there is no teacher training session which may train teachers how to teach blind students in the sighted classrooms. All the participants underscored the need of teacher training which could enable all teachers to understand the special needs of blind students regarding deictic markers.

Teachers should always read while writing on board. They should read aloud slides for their blind students and should always explain the setting of the pictures they are showing to their class. The description of the pictures should be so clear that if a person closes his eyes and listens to the description then he could also sketch more or less the same picture. Teachers should always remember the names of blind students and should always address them with their names and should adopt a strategy which promises better comprehension, less confusion and almost no isolation for their blind students. Above all

there may be some other strategies for the prospective teachers as well but the strategy which the teacher may think empathetically will be the best strategy.

The curriculum should address the need of teaching masses about blind people as well. "Three days to see" by Hellen Keller in the curriculum of B.A. in the universities and colleges of Punjab, Pakistan is a nice attempt. Due to this many people are thinking blind people as asset and not as a liability. Some more lessons should be incorporated in the mainstream educational syllabai in all provinces and in all education institutions in the world which should educate the masses how to address the blind people and how to offer help to them when they feel disoriented. As teachers also become teachers after reading this mainstream curriculum so it will not only help them in understanding the special needs of their blind students but will also try to encourage them.

Due to this lack of awareness many sighted schools often refuse to give admission to the blind students and order them to get admission in special education schools instead. The parents of many blind students have also fought this battle and won it but all the parents are not successful in getting their children admitted to sighted schools and always face the challenge of ignorant teachers who think blind students as liability and do not show flexibility and do not co-operate with them. For promoting awareness and to educate teachers about the special needs of blind students regarding deictic expressions is the first step to counter this ideology that blind students are just a burden. The teachers should always think of blind students as the part of the class and should always help them and give them the confidence so that they could also easily travel along with their sighted peers in this academic journey of their lives.

### **Conclusion**

Elaborate reference of deictic systems such as names can be used to help the blind students comprehend the lecture properly. It is a fact that in language acquisition people first learn deictic markers and then later in their lives they learn these elaborate reference systems but a teacher should be aware of the special needs of his students and should employ such elaborate reference systems instead of deictic markers when they have at least one blind student in their classes so that he should not feel isolated.

Oliveira, Quek, Cowan, & Fang (2012) have also come up with a solution of this problem of blind students. They have developed a Haptic Deictic System (HDS) which can capture the gestures of instructor and also tell the instructor about the student's reading line. By haptic glove, the blind student can read the gestures of the teacher and of his classmates and the teacher using iMac screen can direct the blind student to focus on a particular point as the teacher through his gestures direct the gaze of sighted students towards a specific point. Such technological advancements are useful but of course they cannot be employed in all classrooms and especially in developing countries where even the basic facilities are lacking, such technological adjustments are not achievable at the present time. But it is possible to aware the teacher about the problems of blind students which they face due to the deictic markers of the teacher. Awareness of a problem is always the first step towards its solution and this can significantly diminish the woes of blind students in inclusive classes.

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