CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study attempted to look into the practice of inclusive teaching in addressing the needs of visually impaired students in English Language Teaching (ELT) contexts in the second cycle of primary education in Ethiopia. It also gave attention to investigation of opportunities and challenges that influence the implementation of inclusive education. In the light of this, teachers’ beliefs and attitudes were also taken into consideration in the study to show their impact and interplay with other interrelated factors.

Hence, this chapter highlights the overall study by giving background to the study, stating the nature of the problem in a concise form with set objectives and research questions to provide direction to which the study explores. It also indicates the significance and limitation of the study. For convenience, the meanings of key words are presented including acronyms and abbreviations which are used in the thesis.

1.1. Background of the Study

Nowadays inclusive education has become a frequently used concept all over the world and has got legitimate prominence through various international conventions. Consequently, many countries have adopted the system supported by legal framework and policies to address special needs education at large.

As a result of relentless struggle, the inclusion of students with disabilities in ordinary schools has become a part of the global movement for human rights with a belief that all
learners have a right to education, regardless of their individual characteristics or difficulties.

Apparently there is a view in many societies that instead of segregating students with special needs in special classes and schools, the idea of inclusive education is propagated as fitting schools to meet the needs of all students.

As a general point of view ‘Inclusive education is found to be ethically acceptable, psycho-socially sound, pedagogically commendable and cost effective compared to segregated education (UNESCO, 1994) cited in Tefera (2005: 91).

One of the main factors influencing the successful implementation of any inclusive policy is the positive attitude of teachers. Teachers’ beliefs and attitudes are critical in ensuring the success of inclusive practices since teachers’ acceptance of the policy of inclusion is likely to affect their commitment to implementing it. These could be attested by giving due research attention to the practice of inclusion with particular reference to visual impairments in English language teaching settings.

Teaching English as a foreign language in inclusive setting would be a challenge for teachers as far as learners with disabilities are concerned. In this case, improving the academic performance of students from non-English backgrounds requires teachers’ attention in the prevention of failure. Moreover, an inclusive education demands the class teacher to be flexible, creative, ready to learn from the learners and to be capable of initiating active learning.
In order to cater as effectively as possible to the diverse learning needs of the disabled, teachers should apply effective teaching strategies and techniques, pay attention to selection of materials, adapt the curriculum task design, and classroom management skills. It is also important for teachers who teach students with disabilities to know about the nature, causes, assessment, and treatment of learning disabilities (Hallahan, 2005).

Hence English language teachers need to recognize that there are students who ‘need special attention in learning English language because of limitations due to disabilities. But this reminds us that this awareness and practice have been widely ignored. This research is, therefore, geared to study how teachers behave with regard to managing visual impairments in inclusive educational setting in ELT classes.

It also investigates whether the teachers promote the practice of inclusive teaching addressing the needs of visually impaired students in learning English or hamper and cause devastating results.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The concept and practice of inclusive education emanates from the following key issues (UNESCO, 2001: 15).

1. Inclusive education starts from the belief that the right to education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just society.

2. In order to realize this right, the Education for All movement has worked to make quality basic education available to all.
3. Inclusive education takes the Education for All agenda forward by finding ways of enabling schools to serve all children in their communities, as part of an inclusive education system.

4. Inclusive education is concerned with all learners, with a focus on those who have traditionally been excluded from educational opportunities - such as learners with special needs and disabilities, children from ethnic and linguistic minorities, and so on.

These key issues could also be taken as conceptual framework for this study which aimed at investigating various pertinent questions in local contexts. According to millennium development goal by the year 2015 at least 75% of children and youth with disabilities of school age will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling (Peters, 2003).

But this could only be achieved if nations take initiatives to promote inclusive education widening the scope of opportunities for large masses of children, especially considering the needs of the disabled.

In Ethiopia, there are no reliable data available on the disabled and inclusion. According to international estimates, “10 to 20 % of any school age population has special educational needs” (ILO 2004, Peters 2003, UNESCO 2001, Wimam and Sandu 2004) cited in MoE(2006:5). In this regard, the SNE Program Strategy estimates “from over 15 million school age population 1.5–3 million learners will need special attention due to disabilities” (MoE, 2006: 11).

According to MoE Statistics Annual Abstract (2010), the total number of students with
special education needs in 2009/10 in primary education (Grades 1-8) was around 47,463. Among these, visually impaired students constitute 6,704. But currently students with special education needs are expected to exceed this figure. Though the statistics show these, there is no empirical reference that indicates how many of these have an access to education either in special classes or in inclusive schools.

Ethiopia accepted many international agreements such as Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993), The World Declaration on Education For All (EFA) (1990), the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994), and The Convention on the Rights of the Child (2009), but these have not yet reached to the desired level.

All children with disabilities can learn better if teachers are able to identify learners’ special needs and support them in their effort to achieve desired outcomes. Moreover, “When teachers take on the challenge of making their classrooms and schools more inclusive, they become more skillful and practitioners” (UNESCO, 2001:34).

Implementation of inclusive teaching in the current practice requires that teachers be primarily responsible for educating all the children in the classroom. This however is not easy to put into effect. As Tefera (2005:108) clearly stated, “Inclusion is not an easy task. It requires a lot of struggle and commitment to overcome attitudinal and social barriers.” Though ‘Education for All’ is the motto of the country, the practice of creating equal opportunities and the right for participation of children with visual impairment in an English class are very limited.
In the learning process, activity limitations have the greatest impact on the social domain of visually impaired students. They need a great deal of orientation and support to be as mobile and independent as sighted children. Even when support is available, such children are often restricted from certain activities, and this can significantly curtail the amount and quality of their interaction with peers.

In this case, English language teachers are required to make many modifications for the visually impaired students while implementing the curriculum and syllabus, using text books and other facilities. They can also provide specific assistance to the visually impaired in order to create opportunities for learning.

The barriers to learning faced by students with visual impairments in an inclusive setting are many and complex. These challenges could emanate from different directions such as limited understanding of the concept of disability, negative attitude towards persons with disabilities in general and visual impairments in particular, lack of training and administrative support, and pedagogical challenges.

Numerous studies in many countries have involved teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion. For example, Ali, Mustapha and Jelas(2006) indicated that teachers in USA and Germany had most positive attitudes towards integration (inclusion) while in Ghana and others had less positive attitudes due to various factors such as limited or non-existent training to acquire integration competencies, limited opportunities for integration, teaching experience, and experience with students with special education needs.
These are also commonly observed in Ethiopian context, where many teachers devoid of these are not in a position to address the issues of the disabled in inclusive setting. Inclusive teaching in this regard should recognize, accommodate and meet the diverse needs of all students. It should also acknowledge that students have a range of individual learning needs.

In this case, teachers in inclusive schools are expected to manage the challenge of an increasingly diverse classroom, adjust their teaching strategies to accommodate varying learning styles, and to be psychologically and practically prepared to take on the dynamic role of inclusive teacher.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

This research was intended to study the practice of inclusive teaching to see whether it addresses the needs of visually impaired students in ELT settings. Special attention was also given to assess teachers’ beliefs and attitudes toward inclusion of students with disabilities and visual impairments in particular. Visually impaired students were also the concern of the study to seek their opinion with regard to learning with others and identify the strategies they use to compete with other students. Other related issues such as opportunities and challenges in practicing inclusive teaching were also treated in the study. In particular this study was aimed to:

1. investigate teachers’ instructional practices in the process of teaching and assessing VISs’ performance in ELT setting in light of the requirements for inclusive education,
2. assess teachers’ beliefs on inclusive education, disabilities and visual impairments,

3. identify teachers’ attitudes towards inclusive education and the factors that influence these;

4. investigate VISs’ own perceptions, attitudes toward inclusion and learning English with regular students, and strategies they employ in learning with other students,

5. explore teachers’ and VISs’ perceptions of the difficulty level of English language skills which are expected in teaching and learning in inclusive settings, and

6. investigate opportunities and challenges in the process of addressing the needs of visually impaired students in teaching English in inclusive setting.

1.4. Research Questions

This study was conducted in the three metropolitan cities of Amhara National Regional State, Ethiopia, targeting schools in the second cycle (Grades 5-8) by posing the following research questions:

1. What are teachers’ instructional practices in the process of teaching English, and assessing visually impaired students’ performance in inclusive class?

2. What are teachers’ beliefs related to inclusive education, disabilities and visual impairments in particular?
3. What are the attitudes of teachers towards inclusion? What are the factors that influence teachers’ attitudes?

4. What are teachers’ and visually impaired students’ perceptions about the difficulty level of English language skills in the process of teaching and learning in inclusive settings?

5. What are VISs’ own perceptions about themselves and attitudes towards inclusion, and what are the strategies they use when learning English in inclusive settings?

6. What are the opportunities available and challenges teachers and VISs face in the process of teaching and learning English respectively in inclusive settings?

1.5. Significance of the Study

In a foreign language teaching context such as English where learners, especially visually impaired students, do not have an access to use the target language out of class, it is important for those who teach students with visual impairments to know about the nature, impact, and accommodation of learning limitations. The practice of inclusion could be effective if teachers are aware of these. In this case, English language learners with visual impairments, who need special support from teachers, will be disadvantaged by lacking trained and experienced teachers to address their learning difficulties and related needs simultaneously.
Hence studying the practice of inclusive teaching with the consent of visually impaired students by giving special attention to other interrelated issues which directly or indirectly affect its implementation provides a stimulus for a research. This is believed to benefit not just students with visual impairments but also teachers by making them aware of the nature of visually impaired students’ needs and of the ways to meet these in the context of teaching English language.

To the knowledge of the researcher, there are still limited empirical studies which could indicate the current practice of inclusive teaching in schools in Ethiopian context. Hence, this research was intended to fill the gap in this widely ignored area, and make the problem visible in the field of language instruction to the disabled in an inclusive educational setting.

Moreover, many of research studies conducted on inclusive education, as far as researcher’s knowledge is concerned, tended to focus on the disabled and subjects in general, without giving due attention to specific disability and subject area. Consequently, issues associated with the visually impaired in the ELT context haven’t got due research attention. In this case, this research would bring a positive response to this neglected issue.

As far as inclusive education is concerned it should be clear that every school has its own unique set of challenges in handling visually impaired students. In the light of this, successful solutions can only be found if the local context is thoroughly investigated and taken into account.
This is highly essential in teaching English to visually impaired students in inclusive settings. A student with a visual disorder can succeed in inclusive school if given the right support and accommodations. This means, they can also learn properly if their problems are identified and if they get support in their effort to achieve desired outcomes.

The findings of this research are, therefore, believed to have the following contributions:

1. making teachers aware of the importance of teaching disabled students in general and visually impaired students in particular with other students in inclusive context,
2. bringing an insight into how to create conducive teaching and learning environments in teaching English in inclusive setting,
3. informing concerned bodies about the current picture of inclusive practices in the second cycle schools,
4. providing an opportunity for planners, curriculum designers, policy makers, administrators and concerned bodies like NGOs to address the issue of inclusive education related to the disabled students in general and the visually impaired students in particular, and initiating particularly researchers who would like to conduct a research on inclusive education taking specific disability and subject area as their concern.

1.6. Limitation of the Study

As the practice of inclusive education in Ethiopia is in its infant stage, lack of accessible data on inclusive education was the challenge for the researcher. In addition to this as
Visually impaired students: Students who are totally blind including those with low vision.

Inclusive education: An education system which involves all students irrespective of their disabilities in regular education settings instead of referring them to special schools.

Disabilities: Conditions of children which make them have physical limitations such as visual and hearing.

Metropolitan city: A city whose administration is established by more than one cities having local administration status, on the basis of distinct communication relations. (The Revised Proclamation of the Amhara National Region, 2003: 4)

1.8. Acronyms

1. ELT: English Language Teaching
2. SNE: Special Needs Education
3. VIS: visually impaired student
4. MOE: Ministry of Education
5. REB: Regional Education Bureau
In this chapter an attempt was made to introduce the essence of the research problem by posing research questions. The basic purpose, significance and limitation of the study were also elaborated. In addition to these, key terms, acronyms and abbreviations were stated to make the whole research reports comprehensive and meaningful. In the next chapter the context of the study, i.e., the study area in relation to physical setting and the themes of the study are presented in a concise way.
REFERENCES


The Revised Proclamation for the Establishment, Organisation and Definition of Powers and Duties of Urban Centers of the Amhara National Region.
