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# LANGUAGE LEARNING CHALLENGES AND INCLUSIVE ASSESSMENT IN EFL FOR DEAF AND HARD-OF-HEARING STUDENTS

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In recent years, inclusive education has become an important area of educational research and practice, particularly in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). English plays an increasingly significant role in academic, professional, and social communication; however, access to effective EFL instruction is not equally available to all learners. Deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) learners may experience specific linguistic, communicative, pedagogical, and assessment-related barriers that affect their participation and achievement in English language classrooms. Traditional EFL instruction often relies heavily on auditory input, oral interaction, pronunciation practice, and listening comprehension, which may create additional challenges for learners with limited or no access to spoken language through hearing. At the same time, DHH learners constitute a diverse group whose linguistic experiences differ according to the degree and onset of hearing loss, use of sign language, spoken language proficiency, educational background, access to hearing technology, and individual learning preferences. Their English language development may also involve interaction between sign language and written and/or spoken languages, meaning that learning English may represent a complex multilingual process rather than simply the acquisition of another spoken language. Consequently, difficulties in vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing, speaking, and listening should be understood in relation to learners' linguistic experiences and access to language input rather than being interpreted as a lack of learning ability [1].

One of the major challenges in DHH learners' EFL education concerns the development of receptive and productive language skills. Limited access to incidental auditory language exposure may influence vocabulary acquisition, grammatical awareness, phonological knowledge, reading comprehension, and written production. Learners may encounter difficulties with unfamiliar vocabulary, complex grammatical structures, sentence organization, contextual meanings, and oral communication. Speaking and listening can be particularly challenging because conventional EFL classrooms frequently assess pronunciation, spontaneous speech, verbal interaction, and listening comprehension. These practices may not always provide an accurate representation of DHH learners' actual English language competence because they can measure access to auditory information in addition to language knowledge. Therefore, multimodal and learner-centered instruction is particularly relevant for DHH learners. The integration of written language, visual materials, gestures, sign language, images, captions, video, and digital resources can provide more accessible language input and create alternative opportunities for communication and learning. Similarly, assessment should incorporate multiple modes, such as written responses, visual comprehension activities, captioned videos, vocabulary and grammar tasks, reading portfolios, project-based activities, signed responses, and technology-supported assessment. Such adaptations do not imply lowering academic standards; rather, they allow learners to demonstrate the same intended language outcomes through accessible forms of communication [2].

The issue of accessible EFL assessment is particularly significant within the broader development of inclusive education in Uzbekistan, where increasing attention to equal educational opportunities creates a need for pedagogical practices that address the specific needs of learners with disabilities. An effective assessment system should distinguish between a learner's actual English language competence and the accessibility limitations of a particular assessment format. Digital technologies, interactive platforms, captioned multimedia, and artificial intelligence-based educational tools may further support individualized learning, visual presentation of linguistic information, immediate feedback, and alternative forms of communication, although their effectiveness depends on appropriate instructional design, accessibility, and teacher competence. Against this background, the present study focuses on the



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learning difficulties experienced by DHH learners in EFL contexts and examines assessment methods that can provide fair, accessible, and pedagogically appropriate evaluation of their English language abilities. The study aims to identify major linguistic and pedagogical difficulties, examine the influence of limited auditory access and diverse linguistic backgrounds on English learning, analyze the limitations of conventional EFL assessment practices, identify multimodal and alternative assessment strategies, and formulate practical recommendations for teachers. The significance of the study lies in promoting assessment practices that measure language competence rather than sensory accessibility alone, thereby contributing to more accurate evaluation, greater classroom participation, and more equitable opportunities for DHH learners in EFL education.

Deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) learners may experience a range of difficulties when learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly because many conventional language-learning environments depend heavily on auditory input. Limited access to spoken language can affect the development of vocabulary, grammar, phonological awareness, reading comprehension, and written production [3]. Vocabulary learning may be challenging when learners have fewer opportunities to encounter English incidentally through listening, while grammatical difficulties may arise from limited exposure to complex sentence structures and contextual language use. Reading and writing can also be affected by differences in linguistic background, especially for learners who use sign language as their primary language. In addition, speaking and listening activities may create particular challenges because they often require direct access to auditory information and spontaneous oral interaction. However, these difficulties should not be interpreted as evidence of limited intellectual or language-learning ability. Instead, they are closely related to the accessibility of language input, learners' previous educational experiences, their level of English proficiency, use of sign language, and access to hearing technologies. Therefore, understanding individual linguistic and educational backgrounds is essential for developing effective EFL instruction for DHH learners.

Another important issue concerns the suitability of traditional assessment practices for DHH learners. Conventional EFL assessment frequently emphasizes listening comprehension, pronunciation, oral interaction, and spontaneous speaking, which may disadvantage learners who have limited access to auditory information. Such assessments can measure not only English proficiency but also the learner's ability to access the auditory form in which the test is presented. For this reason, assessment procedures should be designed to distinguish between actual language competence and difficulties caused by inaccessible assessment formats. Multimodal assessment can provide more equitable opportunities for DHH learners to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. Depending on the intended learning outcome, teachers can use written responses, visual comprehension tasks, reading portfolios, vocabulary and grammar exercises, captioned videos, project-based assessment, presentations supported by visual materials, and, where appropriate, signed responses. These methods can maintain the same academic and linguistic objectives while providing alternative modes through which learners can demonstrate achievement. The purpose of adapted assessment is therefore not to reduce academic expectations but to remove unnecessary barriers that are unrelated to the language ability being assessed [4].

Multimodal instruction and assessment can further improve the accessibility and effectiveness of EFL education for DHH learners. Visual materials, written instructions, images, gestures, sign language, subtitles, captioned videos, interactive digital platforms, and other technological resources can provide multiple forms of language input and reinforce the connection between linguistic form and meaning. Technology-supported learning may also enable individualized practice, immediate feedback, repeated exposure to language materials, and flexible forms of communication. However, the use of technology alone does not guarantee inclusive education; its effectiveness depends on appropriate pedagogical design, accessibility, teacher competence, and consideration of individual learner needs. In the context of Uzbekistan, the development of more inclusive EFL practices requires greater attention to the linguistic diversity and specific educational needs of DHH learners. Teachers should therefore combine accessible instructional materials with flexible assessment strategies and continuous feedback. Such an



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approach can support the development of English language skills while ensuring that assessment more accurately reflects learners' actual competence. Ultimately, an inclusive EFL framework should focus on providing DHH learners with meaningful opportunities to access English, participate in classroom activities, and demonstrate their knowledge through appropriate and accessible forms of communication [5].

In conclusion, Deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) learners may face specific challenges in EFL education due to limited access to auditory input, differences in linguistic backgrounds, and the use of assessment methods that are primarily designed for hearing learners. These challenges highlight the importance of distinguishing between actual English language competence and difficulties caused by inaccessible instructional or assessment formats. Multimodal teaching and flexible assessment methods, including visual materials, written tasks, captioned videos, project-based activities, portfolios, and appropriate digital technologies, can provide DHH learners with more equitable opportunities to develop and demonstrate their English skills. Therefore, an inclusive EFL approach should focus on accessibility, individual learner needs, and multiple forms of communication while maintaining appropriate academic standards. Such practices can contribute to more accurate assessment, greater classroom participation, and improved learning opportunities for DHH learners [6].

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