

AN INTERVIEW WITH WAJIHA NAQVI AND BRETT REYNOLDS

What we can learn from a blind ESL student

By Pankaj (PB) Bhattacharjee and Wajiha Naqvi, Humber College

Learning English as a Second Language comes with its usual predicaments and involves a lot of effort, systematic study, mentoring, and use of technology. It just adds another layer of complexity when a learner has vision impairment or any other learning difficulty or limitations. In Canada, it is not unusual that people with visual impairment are learning English in schools specially equipped for them where they are provided with a set of arrangements catering their needs. In most of the cases, the learners use braille and get help from specially trained instructors. But learning English in a mainstream program like English for Academic Purposes is not that common in public colleges where there is little or no special infrastructure for a blind student.

The teaching can also come with added levels of complexity, especially for a teacher who has never done it before. In this interview, Brett Reynolds, Professor of TESL and EAP in Humber College's English Language Centre, and Wajiha Naqvi, a blind student who has recently completed her EAP program at Humber College, share their experience of the teaching and learning respectively. Wajiha is the first blind student Brett has had in his class in more than 20 years of language teaching. On the other hand, for Wajiha it was old hat. Below is our conversation.

Pankaj: Wajiha, would you mind telling us the extent of your vision?

Wajiha: I cannot read and write and I can see in the day but I cannot see in the night.

PB: What have you studied so far?

WN: I haven't finished any degree so far. EAP is the only degree I have. I started (another program) but I couldn't finish. Right now, I am doing general arts and science at Humber. It's a college transfer course and I want to do computer programming in the future.

PB: And, what made you interested in learning English?

WN: I started my university and found out that I had some problems in writing essays and all that stuff and that's why I thought of coming to college and starting EAP.

PB: And that's where you met Brett. So, Brett, what difficulties did you face to incorporate a visually impaired student in the mainstream EAP program?

Brett: Surprisingly, few. When I first found out that Wajiha was going to be in my class and that she was blind, I was sort of nervous. I didn't know how some of the activities were going to work. Moreover, I assumed that there would be some need for braille and I had no experience with it. So, I anticipated quite a number of issues but surprisingly it turned out that there really was very little involved.

PB: Did you complete any needs analysis for Wajiha?

BR: Well, sort of. The college notified me that she was in my class and I got a letter of accommodation. If a student self identifies to the accessible learning services, they'll draft a letter of accommodation, and that's a type of needs analysis. Later on, I wrote an email to Wajiha and I asked her a number of things about braille and stuff like that and she wrote back and said, "no braille, it's just too old fashioned."

WN: (laughing) You have to move ahead with the times.

PB: So, if you don't use braille, what do you do?

WN: I use a screen reader. It's called [JAWS](#). It talks and you listen to it. It's an audio software.

PB: And what about writing? I mean, how do you write and edit your writing?

WN: I type and it reads what I type to me. After I've written something, I go to the writing center if I need help for the academic stuff. I do write for an organization. I write articles for them. So, I write and then I proofread. JAWS lets me jump around quickly and listen to different parts of the document.

PB: I see. So, Brett, with that taken care of, what were Wajiha's other special requirements in terms of attending classes and facilitating study?

BR: The main thing was that any handouts or anything that needed to be read in the class. She needed to get those before class in order to prepare. As she said, she has this software that helps her by reading those handouts out to her. I was supposed to send her the materials the night before so she could prepare them. Occasionally, I forgot or I was late and I would send her the materials during the class from my laptop.

In class, she has her computer open all the time and she often has an earbud in one ear. But, whenever I handout something to everybody else I would just let Wajiha know which handout that was. She'll pull it up, and yes, it worked. I guess, sometimes she needed to move because her battery was dying and needed to be plugged into the wall. But that was about it in class.

Another issue was testing. Normally, in a case like this we would refer the student to the test center but my tests involve dictations and a live lecture. The

test centre would have needed recordings, and it was easier just to keep it live. So, we just booked a room, and I did the dictation for her and then she spent rest of the time working on it.

One other thing that I modified a little bit was, as part of the class, we watched a number of lectures. And some of the lectures used slides with graphs and things like this. Often, I would pause the lecture, and I would do this normally, explain some words or some difficult concepts. In Wajiha's case, I sometimes described the graphs if it was important so that she would understand. So, I had to be aware that there were important elements that everybody else was getting that she wasn't seeing. But it wasn't a problem.

PB: Anything particular about editing her writing or giving feedback?

BR: This is something I had to do a little bit differently because when I correct essays I use MS Word's track-changes function. And what that does is it displays the changed text, like if you strike something it shows it in red and strike through and if you enter something it shows it in green. But, JAWS (the computer software) doesn't tell you the color of that. It would just read everything. So, I had to put in the text *comment here* and then I would put the comment and then it would *say end of comment*, just so that she could differentiate my comments from her text.

PB: Wjaiha, is there any other equipment and device you use to study?

WN: Laptop and headphone; that's all.

PB: Are there limits on how you use a computer?

WN: No, not really.

PB: Brett, what is your observation regarding her use of technology?

BR: Basically, from what I could perceive, Wajiha was obviously very proficient in using her computer. She has it with her all the time. She would write me email, and we'd write back and forth. She was reading the material on computer, writing assignments, and sending them to me. I did notice that she doesn't use a cell phone. That's one big difference: the other students use cell phones to look up words and record themselves speaking and things, but Wajiha doesn't have one. However, she has her computer open so much that she doesn't need a cell phone. Actually, I'm the same. I always carry my computer and I don't have a phone.

The only technology issue she had was using the learner management system that we have here at Humber, Blackboard. It wasn't working well for her. I guess something about JAWS. So rather than submitting assignments through blackboard she just emailed them to me.

At the end of the course students do presentations and some students use Powerpoint and Wajiha didn't. It wasn't a requirement but it was something that some students used, but it's a minor thing. In the end, there is not a lot technology in the class.

PB: While using visuals (e.g. PowerPoint, slides, pictures etc.) in class how did you support Wajiha?

BR: She is very proactive about asking, not shy. When I would write something on the board I would have to make sure to read it out, to say what it was. For example, if I was describing the form of a question or something and drawing arrows and circling things, I would have to be conscious to say what I am doing rather than just writing it on the whiteboard and assuming people were following. But, by and large, whatever visuals there were, were reasonably easy to describe or were not entirely necessary and, you know, you and I, probably we rely on visuals lot more than Wajiha does. She has accommodations she makes to the world.

PB: Wajiha, do you need someone to help you in a classroom for taking notes or any other purposes?

WN: Yes. I have an accommodation in my letter for a notetaker. They are for me to help me out taking notes in the class in case the teacher is giving lecture and if I have to take notes, note taker can help me out. Somebody from Humber volunteers for me in this job. Right now, I am not getting this service so I use Note Express, some software, which is something similar. It records the lecture and then I download it and the software transcribes it to notes.

PB: That's great. So, Brett, what was the general classroom environment when Wajiha was there? How were the other students?

BR: I think Wajiha is a very outgoing, happy person; she's just a normal person. She makes a lot of friends in class. People would cooperate with her and help her. I wasn't aware of anybody being particularly surprised or treating her really differently. She fit into the class well. The classroom environment was, I would say, just a very normal classroom environment. These students have had eight months together and they developed a quit a good relationship.

PB: Did she interact with other students and the vice versa?

BR: Absolutely, yes. Sometimes, we do activities where people move around the classroom to find a partner and things like that and Wajiha has a white cane and she just knows the classroom. She moves round by herself. I mean, it was a nice group of people. My classes also have a lot of speaking and Wajiha would participate in groups or in pairs. When I was asking questions, she would often volunteer her opinion or give an answer. So, yes complete participation.

- PB:** Wajiha, so far, what are the most challenging factors for you in terms of your study?
- WN:** Well, thanks to Humber, they gave me all the facilities. In the beginning, when I came to Toronto, I started at University of Toronto. I wanted to do a degree in Computer Science but they didn't have the facilities I needed and that was the major challenge I faced. Consequently, I had to leave U of T and after I came here and started EAP. (U of T) didn't help me. Even though, they knew I was visually impaired, before we left Nigeria we told them we were visually impaired (me and my sister), they didn't comply. But, Humber is OK, they help us. If I have problem, they suggest me what to do.
- PB:** Wajiha, what about the role of your family in your study?
- WN:** My family supports me a lot. They are really good. They help me out. My mom actually, she, wants us to study.
- PB:** What's your future plan?
- BR:** I don't have a future plan yet. Too early to think about this. But I have thought of taking TESL or studying computer programming in the days ahead.
- PB:** As a learner of English what has been your overall experience? In particular, have teachers and students accommodated your needs?
- WN:** Yes, everybody accepted me well. It was good. It's like a good memory. And my English is better now and I am confident for my degree in terms of language.
- PB:** Brett, what is your overall experience of having Wajiha in your class?
- BR:** It was really good for me because she's a wonderful person, but also because I had never taught a blind student before. At the beginning, I was quite anxious. I did not know what to expect. I thought, it was possibly going to be a lot of extra work—which I was willing to do—but I needed to think about planning and that kind of thing. With the technology, though, and with Wajiha's experience using her computer and just with her general personality, it really turned out that it was much easier than I'd expected. I learned something and I am very glad I did. And, the next time I have a blind student in my class, I think, I will be much more prepared than I was this time.

Author Bio



Pankaj Bhattacharjee is an ESL Teacher and a recent Humber TESL graduate. Before migrating to Canada in 2016, he has taught English literature at Metropolitan University, Bangladesh for five years. He is currently enrolled in MA in Applied Linguistics program at York University, Toronto for upcoming fall semester.

I'm Wajiha Viqar Naqvi, a visually-impaired girl but I am so motivated to become a source of support for the humanity. Currently I am doing certificate in general art science from the Humber College. The problems which I often face increase my experience in different fields and teach me new ways to survive in this beautiful planet earth. Writing and volunteering are my passions. I write articles for a Pakistani organization empowering the differently abled persons www.facebook.com/empowering.tdp