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## **Online Education and the Independence of the Literacy Practices of Visually Impaired Sinhala Language Learners: A Sociolinguistic Study**

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### **Abstract**

Informal interviews with Visually Impaired Sinhala Language Learners (VISLLs) have revealed that the academic dependence of them due to visual-centric practices of Sinhala language instruction and gaps in technology, has deteriorated with Sri Lanka's momentary shift to online tertiary education due to the onset of COVID - 19 pandemic. However, the local research literature still remains silence regarding this. On the other hand, Sociolinguists have reported that literacy practices have been patterned by social institutions and power relationships. Thus, this study aimed to explore how online education contributes to the independence of the literacy practices of VISLLs in the literacy events related to participating in the lectures. Phenomenological research paradigm along with an exploratory - qualitative research design was adopted in order to allow for an in-depth investigation. The results indicate that online education, in which the vision and technology play leading roles, has largely contributed to the dependence of the literacy practices of VISLLs with regard to the studied literacy events. It is also evident that inadequate technology literacy of VISLLs as well as frequent use of visual-centric language and visual aids in online teaching has prevented VISLLs from enjoying the independence in online learning. Further, the study suggests that it is indispensable to technologically empower the VISLLs who do not have sufficient technology literacy, and make necessary changes to the visual centric practices of online teaching in order to make the literacy practices of VISLLs more independent and make the online education environment more inclusive.

**Keywords:** *Literacy practices, Online education, Sinhala language learners, Sociolinguistics, Visually impaired*

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