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## Foreign Language Motivation – Some Deliberations on its Enhancement in Visually Impaired Learners

### 1. Introduction

The command of foreign languages is important in daily lives of people whether learners are disabled or not. Using the foreign language in formal and informal situations provides learners with satisfaction. Indeed, it is expected satisfaction that motivates people to learn foreign languages and work hard to attain the ultimate language success. The same also holds true for visually impaired (VI) students who constitute quite a significant group of learners. According to Polish Association for the Blind, there are 11 500 visually impaired students. Learning a foreign language for visually impaired (VI) people is as important as for sighted learners. The command of English not only enables VI learners to communicate in the target language but also leads to new opportunities. The blind learners perceive the world through the senses that are not frequently so easily accessed by the sighted people. The VI learners, whether partially or fully blind, characterize with a well trained memory, good listening skills and also some of the cognitive skills. Thus, it is reasoned that VI people have a great potential for foreign language learning.

In the field of visual impairment, much attention is given to rehabilitation and education as preparation for the workplace. A good command of English gives a chance to VI people to be perceived as valuable members of a society. Fulfilling the roles of interpreters or IT specialists is a guarantee of the VI person's high social status.

Whatever prejudices toward the VI learner exist, especially in higher education, it must be recognized that schools are unquestionably bound by law to accommodate these students.

Many learning VI students can successfully complete the foreign language requirement if they are properly motivated. Frequently, the VI students continue to use their language skills in a variety of jobs and professions related to foreign language teaching.

Motivation has been thoroughly researched in the field of second language acquisition and educational psychology. Similarly, in special education a problem of motivation has been given considerable attention. As to the VI population, the research has been mainly focused on their motives to work (Eniola and Adebisi 2007) or to perform regular physical exercises (Surakka and Kivela 2008). However, to the present author's knowledge there is still no research devoted entirely to foreign language motivation in the context of VI learners.

Motivation of the individual visually impaired person is a relevant factor. It seems that in the case of VI people motivation is closely related to their emotional side, previous learning experience and goal setting. Enhancing motivation of the VI learners may pose a problem for an FL teacher, however, it is much more difficult to sustain motivation of the learners who frequently struggle with the feelings of learned helplessness and lack of self-worth. The potential obstacles that interfere with the effective motivation development are explored in detail. Although the VI learners face a number of challenges in L2 classes, much can be done if one takes into consideration their needs, perspectives and unique abilities. It is hoped that the article, apart from yielding the insight into the theoretical issues of motivation, will provide L2 teachers with some practical hints on how to provide a better learning environment for the VI students.

## 2. Motivation in second language acquisition

### 2.1. The concept of language learning motivation

There is considerable confusion as to the definition of motivation due to the multitude of existing motivation theories which make it difficult to construct a general model of language learning motivation. The term 'motivation' is used in everyday personal and professional life and describes a concept which is a powerful human characteristic. Dörnyei (2005) asserts that motivation is an umbrella concept used to refer to a variety of meanings, such as affect, cognition, motivated behaviour, a personality trait, some kind of process, mental energy, inner force or power, attitudinal complex set of habits, stimulus appraisal, directional choice or abstraction. There are various approaches to motivation that has been of interest to several disciplines. Summarizing all these approaches Dörnyei (2005) notices that the only thing about motivation most researchers would agree on is that it, by definition, concerns the direction and magnitude of human behaviour, that is the choice of a particular action, the persistence with it, the effort expended on it. As to specific

definition of language learning motivation one may notice that researchers in the field of L2 motivation make use of what other disciplines have developed in that respect. However, apart from the environmental and cognitive factors related to learning in a broad educational context, language learning motivation contains some distinctive elements. The first feature concerns the very nature of language itself and its learning that is incomparable to other forms of learning. Foreign language learning involves both the “what” and the “how,” that is declarative and procedural knowledge. Undoubtedly, language is not only a communication system but also a part of the unique self as well as of the culture of the community using it. Therefore, foreign language learning has a significant impact on our personality. Moreover, unlike other school subjects, language learning is not a socially neutral field. Gardner (1985: 10) made an attempt to formulate a simple definition of language learning motivation in which he emphasizes “the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity.” In this definition, as we may see, Gardner adopted a social psychological approach in which second language learning motivation is perceived as socially based. However, there was a need to work out a new definition that would reflect new models and approaches to motivation. Williams and Burden (1997: 121), on the basis of social constructivist framework, construed a new definition of motivation that is perceived as “a state of cognitive and emotional arousal which leads to a conscious decision to act, and which gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and/or physical effort in order to attain a previously set goal or goals.” An interesting definition of language learning motivation was provided by Dörnyei (2005) since it reflects a process-oriented perspective on L2 motivation. They view motivation as “the dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritized, operationalized and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out” (ibid.).

## 2.2. The significance of motivation in language learning

As it has been pointed out, there is a confusion not only about defining motivation but also developing one motivation theory. Despite the confusion, both the researchers and foreign language teachers agree upon the point that motivation is the most influential factor in SLA. Even if we put aside the results of various studies quoted above, we do admit from our everyday experience that there is no effective learning without motivation. Analyzing the features of motivated learners it may be reasoned that they are able to acquire the language regardless of their abilities. As Dörnyei (2005) noticed, high motivation can make up for insufficient aptitude, quality of instruction, or unfavourable conditions. A question that may be posed at this stage of discussion is how it is possible for the motivated learner

to overcome all the obstacles on a way to the ultimate success in L2 learning. It seems that they possess some features in common, one of them being the knowledge on how to make use of learning strategies. These strategies facilitate the learning process, especially taking notes or rehearsing material. Another feature of the motivated learners is their ability to be involved in autonomous behaviour. Since autonomy implies taking responsibility for one's learning, effective motivational thinking implies managing its affective dimension in order to optimise and sustain one's involvement in learning. Furthermore, the motivated learners seem to be more active and involved in L2 learning than these whose motivation is low. Specifically, L2 motivation has an impact on the amount of interaction with native speakers and the received input. Moreover, it also influences the test performance and proficiency level. Finally, the greatest role of motivation is in initiating learning a foreign language and then sustaining this process. This point seems to be of special relevance for visually impaired learners whose motivation may be easily triggered by means of various techniques described below, however, it is more difficult to sustain it over longer period of time.

### 3. Motivation and specificity of L2 teaching to the VI learners

Vision deficit has a great impact on a way a person perceives the surrounding reality. Vision plays an important role in our culture since it participates in 80% of all sensory perceptions. Undoubtedly, it is essential in communication being the main means of contact maintenance in normally sighted people. Since FL learning is primarily based on communication, the FL teachers of VI learners need to verify the ways of teaching and testing the students' communicative skills. Apart from teaching them to speak in a target language, the FL teachers should make the VI learners sensitive to the body language, keeping the head straight instead of looking down and general body posture. Vision accelerates the sensory perception of the world as it functions at a distance, gives a constant access to stimuli and provides a great number of information, such as colour, pattern and details. Thus, the teacher's task is to search for possibilities to compensate a sensory deficit. The teacher may use other senses for introducing new vocabulary such as touch, hearing, taste, and smell. Undoubtedly, the work with the VI student requires from the teacher creativity and a great amount of time to prepare teaching materials. Specificity of L2 teaching to the VI learners in order to enhance their motivation is discussed in detail in point 3.3.

#### 3.1. Second language acquisition and the visual impairment

Before having an insight into the nature of motivation displayed by the VI people, we should explore first the nature of second language acquisition which in this case

seems to be complex and distorted from what is experienced by the majority of sighted learners. It is generally acknowledged that an individual develops his/her first language through sensory exploration and understanding of the surrounding reality.<sup>1</sup> Since the acquisition of the first language differs from this of a sighted child, we may expect that some differences may also emerge at the level of second language acquisition.<sup>2</sup> With regard to the L1 acquisition, some slight differences are visible in the interpretation of vocabulary used by the visually impaired and sighted learners (for research details see Jedynak 2008a).<sup>3</sup> It may be reasoned that the VI people relying on a different mode of perception of the world understand the basic concepts in a slightly different way than other individuals. The VI people, in order to understand the reality perceived by the sighted people, attempt to build a mental bridge of associations to fill the gaps between the two worlds. Without effective use of this strategy the VI person cannot understand the meanings of various concepts.

With regard to the L2 acquisition, it is an undeniable fact that the learner brings to the classroom his/her experience gained in the course of the L1 acquisition. The native language constitutes a natural foundation for learning a second language in a formal learning setting. In a situation in which a concept has not been fully grasped by the VI learner in his/her L1, one may expect some problems with an equivalent concept in the L2. Furthermore, the L2 is frequently introduced in a form of highly abstract and decontextualized academic activities which makes the learning process even more difficult.

Undoubtedly, the VI people have a great potential for foreign language learning. Compensating their loss of vision, they developed good memory strategies, excellent listening skills and also some of the cognitive skills such as analytical skills (Jedynak 2008b). However, what can be observed in foreign language classrooms is a great discrepancy between VI learners who failed and these who achieved success in L2 learning. The former group constitutes the majority of the learners. Thus, it seems justifiable to pose a question: why there are so few successful VI learners considering their predisposition for language learning. Partly the answer to the question lies in the very nature of language learning, namely the inability of understanding the L1 reality is transitioned to the L2 learning. However, it would be a simplification to limit all the argumentation to this aspect that is not of prior

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<sup>1</sup> Language development for a child with a visual impairment will be effected by the nature and severity of the sensory impairments, and also by other factors such as motor or cognitive skills. Children with mild to moderate vision losses can be taught to compensate for limited visual information. They do it by using their other senses, thinking skills, and hands-on experience to learn the meaning associated with words and sentences.

<sup>2</sup> L1 acquisition in sighted and visually impaired children differs in terms of its development rate and the nature of input which in the case of VI children is more repetitive and detailed.

<sup>3</sup> The differences between the groups were not striking and they were related to a different modality of perception. The congenitally blind people had greatest problems with giving the properties of the objects that were too distant for them to explore (e.g. the moon) or too difficult to explore by other senses than vision (e.g. fog).

importance for successful language learning. There must be some other reasons that may account for the VI learners' failure. The present author tends to think that the reason is more related to two factors: firstly, the learner himself/herself, especially his/her affective side, previous learning experience, goal setting, and secondly, the learner's setting encompassing teacher's role, teaching process adaptation. These factors may contribute to potential problems with the VI learners' motivation.

### 3.2. The potential problems with the VI learners' motivation

The importance of teaching foreign languages to VI learners is beginning to be recognized in all EU countries. Many young people with visual impairments, apart from information and technology, Polish language studies, pedagogy or history, decide to study foreign languages. In this domain they may achieve success comparable with sighted learners. Moreover, they frequently surpass their sighted counterparts in terms of the acquisition of L2 phonology/phonetics (Jedynak 2009a). There are some VI learners who seem to be particularly gifted in foreign language learning. Giftedness and visual impairment may seem to be the concepts standing in opposition because the former is considered positive exceptionality, while the latter refers to some form of disability. However, regardless of a disability, giftedness is a unique characteristic that may appear in every individual (Jedynak 2008a).

However, before they achieve a success in L2 learning they need to develop motivation that enables them to overcome the learning obstacles. One of them has been already thoroughly discussed above and is related to the very nature of second language acquisition. The VI learner might have some cognitive problems with learning and consequently he/she may need more time than his/her sighted counterparts to understand L2 reality.

Analysing the language course books designed for sighted learners and these for blind learners, one may see striking differences which undoubtedly have an impact on L2 motivation development. The former are colourful while the latter written in Braille are one colour, filled with the rows of points, big in size and very heavy. All these features are sufficient to make the VI learners dislike the course books.

Another factor that may hinder motivation and, consequently, the effective learning process is insufficient amount of autonomy. Autonomy is an element in the VI learner context closely related to his/her motivation. An autonomous behaviour of the learner triggers his/her motivation. The VI learners, unlike the sighted learners, seem to be more dependent on their environment (Jedynak 2008b). This dependence is frequently related to their L1 learning experience and a strong bond with caretakers. Thus, one can dare to issue the statement that there is an interdependence between the lack of vision and a degree of autonomy that can be introduced in an L2 classroom. Since the developmental schemes of VI and sighted children differ, an introduction of the same amount of autonomy in these

two groups might be hazardous. In the VI learner context the boundaries of the students' autonomy are marked by classroom conditions and emotional conditions specific to VI learners (*ibid.*).

Another difficulty that visually impaired learners may face in foreign language classes is related to the provided input and interaction. It is generally acknowledged that comprehensible input is the key to language acquisition. We also need to recognize the importance of social interaction and the negotiation of meaning in the language acquisition process. The interview with two VI students of the English Philology revealed that the problem with input and social interaction is frequently encountered, especially in mainstream education. The input they receive in language courses may be less comprehensible to them than to sighted learners. In particular, the VI students may miss the non-verbal elements of the teaching context such as non-verbal cues or body language which help teachers to make oral input understandable. Furthermore, the partially blind students may have a problem with receiving linguistic input by reading the print materials that are traditionally offered in language courses. Many classroom activities available in resource books are not usually designed with the VI students in mind. Additionally, L2 instructors and classmates are not accustomed to working with the VI learners.

In a mixed ability L2 classroom the VI learners are perceived as alien. Their limited use and perception of body language becomes hurdles in the communication track. Whatever the views are, it is an undeniable fact that visual impairment may and does hinder social communication. The students with vision problems have frozen postures and expressionless faces which may discourage sighted speakers to continue their turn in a discourse.

Consequently, students with vision problems feel neglected and deprived of valuable opportunities to negotiate meaning through interaction with their language teachers and peers.

The situation described above gives rise to negative consequences in the affective domain.

The VI learners who suffer from the lack of comprehensible input and interaction experience such feelings as marginalization, isolation from peer community and lack of motivation to L2 learning. These problems may ultimately influence the VI learner's decision about abandoning a language course elective. When the learner does not have such a possibility and he/she has to attend a compulsory language course, the feeling of frustration aggregates even more. Thus, there is a great role of L2 teachers who should take responsibility for providing a more productive and positive learning environment.

Another issue that needs to be discussed concerns the VI learners' affective domain. Though, so far, there has been no research in the field of typhlopedagogy and SLA, it may be reasoned that the blind or low vision students differ from their sighted counterparts in terms of personal learning goals and L2 language learning experience. It seems that the VI learners do recognize the importance

of L2 learning, however, they display much more pessimistic attitude towards possible perspectives related to the command of languages. This gloomy vision is partly justified since a great number of school for the blind graduates do not continue their language education and even some of them who successfully finish language studies are not given the same employment opportunities as the sighted people. However, there are cases of successful VI students, graduates of the English Philology at UAM, KUL and Wrocław University, which serve as good examples for demotivated learners with vision problems. It seems that the core of the L2 motivation problem lies in the VI learner himself/herself. Frequently, the people with vision deficit perceive themselves as being helpless and worthless. The perception that one 'can' are among the main determinants of motivation within self-efficacy theory, while the basic assumption of learned helplessness construct is that 'cannot' perceptions lead to motivational, cognitive, and effective deficits. In the case of the VI learners a state of helplessness appears when failures are recognized as insurmountable due to perceived lack of ability and control over the actions. In practice, L2 teachers deal with the learners' passivity, demotivation and performance deterioration.

In any discussion on L2 motivation, one cannot omit the impact of previous learning experience which shapes subsequent involvement in learning. All learners, whether with vision deficit or not, filter their experience and adopt selective patterns of thinking in order to focus on the positive aspects and ignore negative ones. Depressed affect of the VI learner may hinder an appropriate interpretation of learning experiences. As a consequence, he/she may concentrate on the negative learning aspects.

### 3.3. Some suggestions for encouraging L2 motivation of the VI learners

Much research confirmed the importance of the affective domain in foreign language learning. An affective filter of a learner influences the L2 learner's readiness to learn a language. Thus, teaching should be relevant, meaningful and emotionally manageable to the learners so as to reduce anxiety for effective learning to take place. This applies even more to visually impaired students, who experience more threats in their learning than sighted learners. The role of L2 teachers is to provide input and meaningful interaction in language courses and to create a cohesive classroom community in which all students, whether they are disabled or not, are encouraged to development and learning. It is an undeniable fact that L2 teachers having the VI students in a classroom face many problems. The potential classroom problems include disruptions by the special-needs student, teacher frustration and the inability of the learning VI student to cope with the material and keep pace with the class, often eventually leading to failure. To counteract such frustrations, an eclectic approach to teaching is vital. Given the variety of student needs, it is advisable to use multiple modality instructional practices, such as Total Physical



Response, suggestopaedia, and other approaches to ensure that during any given lesson, information is received and processed by more than one sense. An entire class devoted to reading comprehension would appeal only to the visual learner, thus denying the visually impaired student the opportunity to participate. Similarly, listening to CD and doing dictations for forty five minutes would appeal primarily to the auditory learner. L2 teachers may encourage the VI students to language learning by developing their understanding of the material. In order to achieve the goal, L2 instructors should develop the learners' understanding through the use of all available senses and experiences, for instance, by using resources that learners can access through touch, sound, taste or smell. L2 teachers may motivate the VI learners by working with substances that have a distinctive fragrance or introducing new lexical L2 items by means of various recordings with birds singing, traffic noise, or storm rumbling. In this way new L2 vocabulary is presented and proper associations between a word and its meaning are formed. Additionally, word descriptions or other stimuli to make up for a lack of first-hand experiences may be employed. In planning any activities L2 teachers should first ask themselves if they would be able to participate in them successfully if they themselves were visually impaired. It is also important for L2 teachers to analyse the input they provide to the VI learner in terms of its non-visual elements which frequently are inappropriately interpreted by the VI learner. The significance of oral language input should be discussed pointing out that the students' enhanced sensory awareness will be especially helpful in increasing listening comprehension and facilitating active participation in a lesson. Another issue that is frequently raised in any discussion on L2 teaching to the VI learners concerns the necessity of introducing all four skills. It is generally acknowledged that the VI students do not favour reading and writing. These two skills are not focal points in many language courses since some L2 teachers find it too time-consuming or unnecessary to practice them in a classroom. Reading texts in language course books published in Braille requires from L2 teachers patience since the blind learner's rate of reading Braille is much slower than reading printed texts. Furthermore, the ability of reading L2 texts cannot be practiced to such an extent as it is the case with sighted students. There is insufficient number of L2 books published in Braille and those that are available are expensive. Consequently, the VI learner cannot master his/her reading skills. Similarly, writing skill is not practiced since there is a limited number of situations in which the student with vision problem uses Braille in L2. However, it is a gross mistake to neglect reading and writing in L2. First, the necessity of four skills is emphasized in L2 teaching methodology and, additionally, the VI learners should be treated in the same way as their sighted counterparts. Providing the blind students with the same requirements as for sighted learners is more motivating for them than allowing them to participate in tailor-made language courses. Since a common reason for the lack of L2 motivation among the VI learners is their negative previous learning experience, it seems justified to ask them about the

factors that contributed to these experiences. It is an imperative for foreign language instructors working with the VI learners to be educated not only in teaching methodology but also in special education. This knowledge may enable L2 teachers to help individual VI students to manage their emotions and take part in learning. L2 teachers may encourage the students with vision deficits to learning through identifying aspects of learning in which the VI learner will engage and plan short-term, easily achievable goals in selected activities. Providing positive feedback to reinforce learning and building self-esteem of demotivated VI learners seems also of great significance. The L2 teachers should also approach more carefully selection of tasks and materials to avoid unnecessary stress for the learners. Primarily, the L2 teachers should gradually increase the range of activities and demands allowing time for the VI pupils to engage in learning. Planning appropriate amounts of time to allow the VI learner to complete tasks satisfactory may be achieved by allocating sufficient time, opportunity and access to equipment to enable him/her to gain information through experimental work. The L2 teachers should be aware of high levels of concentration necessary for some VI students when following or interpreting text, graphics, particularly when using vision aids. They should also employ computers which can boast a significant potential in English classes. Word processors can be used by the blind for practising writing skills, whether in L1 or L2, by manipulating the text or improving spelling. L2 teachers can mark digitally saved essays that can be analysed by the learners. Language software, in turn, offers various tasks that check grammar and vocabulary. Communication software helps the VI students practice various communication strategies and behaviours including non-verbal signals. Finally, Internet services need to be discussed since they have developed over the last decade to be available to the majority of people. Thus, the blind L2 learners should also be able to join the Internet society and make use of new facilities adopted to their needs. The Internet is an alternative source of information for the blind learners because of limited resources in Braille. IRC is the socializing room that invites anyone willing to chat, regardless of disabilities. It seems that L2 teachers who work in well-equipped schools ought to consider seriously inclusion of IRC Newsgroups, Talk or BBS services into the language curriculum since their motivational role is unquestionable. L2 teachers should recognize a need of the VI students to tape-record class sessions for review purposes. If it is possible, textbooks and ancillary materials should be tape-recorded so that the learners can use them as audio books. Rapidly developing technologies enable the VI students to convert printed pages, web pages and CD-ROMs into synthesized speech. A controversial issue in teaching the VI learners is assessment. It is worth considering alternative ways of assignment preparation such as tape-recording an essay. Pencil-and-paper tests treated as valid and objective form of assessment may turn out to be impractical in some circumstances. In the case of the blind L2 students, it seems advisable to assess their progress by analyzing a portfolio of tape-recorded work and periodically interviewing the

learners in the target language. Above all, it is essential for L2 teachers to confer with the students and discuss their progress. The VI learners can provide the teachers with valuable information about classroom procedures and activities that are not helpful for them. All these methodological clues mentioned above may, indeed, trigger language motivation, however, above all, the VI student needs some real examples of the blind or low-vision learners who ultimately achieved a success in foreign language learning or other spheres of life. Successful VI people allow the VI learner to identify with them and build up high self-esteem necessary for motivation emergence.

#### 4. Final thoughts

As it has been pointed out above, in the process of developing L2 motivation, there is a great role of L2 teachers whose task is to do everything possible to provide comprehensible input to the VI learners and encourage them to participate fully in the classroom community. It should be noted that the ideas for enhancing the VI students' motivation are not 'one size fits all' suggestions. They may not be appropriate for all VI students since they have various types of vision deficits and represent different personalities and expectations. The same applies to L2 teachers for whom some of the ideas presented above are unacceptable for a number of reasons. Since educational contexts differ, L2 teachers should evaluate the suggestions for building up L2 motivation in the light of their own academic experience taking into account the needs of the students.

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