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Towards Equal Opportunities – on Foreign Language Education to Visually Impaired University Students

1. University students with visual impairments

The issue of equal educational opportunities is up to date as the population of disabled students, especially visually impaired students, is growing rapidly at Polish universities.[1] According to the General Statistical Office, there were 1071 blind and low-vision students who took up studies at a university level in 2005. In the same year 113 students obtained their MA degrees. Many young people with visual impairments opt for information and technology, Polish language studies, pedagogy, history and foreign languages. In the last domain they achieve comparable success with sighted learners. Frequently, they surpass their sighted counterparts in terms of the acquisition of L2 phonology/phonetics.[2] Many universities appoint specialists who are supposed to cater for the needs of SEN students.[3] Their task is to give advice on what and where to study, to provide the students with the information on various university regulations and stock the data on SEN students. Below in the table there is information of the increase in SEN students at Warsaw University.

The number of visually impaired students at various university departments is growing every year. There is no current data on the increase in VI students in all foreign language departments. Up to 2001 there have been five blind students at English Studies Department at KUL university. The visually impaired students

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[1] I will apply a term of visually impaired or its abbreviation VI to refer to a range of various visual impairments including the total loss of sight or partial sight.

[2] To my knowledge this statement has not been supported by any studies yet.

[3] Throughout the paper I will use the abbreviation SEN that refers to special education needs.

Table 1. Analysis of SEN students into disability categories at Warsaw University

	1996/1997	1999/2000	2001/2002	2003/2004
The total number of SEN students	40	181	250	366
Blind students	**4**	**15**	**19**	**31**
Low-vision students	**7**	**22**	**31**	**49**
Deaf students	–	–	–	2
Hard of hearing students	–	9	16	21
Students with motor disorders	16	43	60	77
Students on wheelchairs	4	13	29	40
Students with chronic diseases	6	44	67	73
Students with psychological and mental problems	1	22	22	68
Students with other health problems	2	13	6	5

are still a minority at universities, however, if they are admitted to universities they should be provided with all the obligatory courses just like the sighted students. In 'Special Education Needs in Europe: The Teaching and Learning of Languages: Insights and Innovation Report' generated by the European Commission one may read that all the people in the European Union, whatever their disability, whether educated in mainstream or segregated schools/streams have equal rights to foreign languages education (2005: 50). One may read it as referring also to university education. There is no need to debate on the importance of foreign language learning in the European Union by SEN students. Regardless a disability, foreign language education, especially at a university level, has a compensatory function for this category of students. A command of English places a VI person higher in a social hierarchy and gives a chance to be employed in various professions such as foreign language teachers, translators or specialists in telemarketing. Even lower level achievers who display various kinds of visual impairments are able to achieve some benefits from foreign language learning which relate to personal and educational development, with possibly modest linguistic achievements. Success in this case extends beyond communicative competence. It includes other educational domains and competence-building areas. In this context, success of a VI person is not understood as foreign language learning for the sake of learning a language but as enhancing education and personal development by means of this language. What is worth mentioning is the fact that VI learners achieve high levels of foreign language competence in comparison to other SEN learners. Despite low vision or its lack they use successfully compensatory senses to learn target languages. There are some VI learners who achieve success in a foreign language at the same level as sighted people and they wish to pursue their language interests at university.

2. Some learning and teaching issues

Many research confirmed the importance placed by Krashen and Terrell on 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. Frequently, they need overcome various obstacles in order to complete their studies. The teacher's task is therefore to create an environment in which a blind or low-vision student feels safe and supported. If the student perceives himself as successful in L2 learning his motivation will be enhanced. According to the report of European Commission published in January 2005 'the evidence from a wide range of studies that shows that language learning in later life is consistently positive and popular when learners perceive themselves as successful' (124). Certainly, each VI person will define success according to their own terms of positive achievement. Creating effective language learning environment is not possible without the involvement of various agents. Among them the most significant are academic and technical staff. However, there is also a great role of administrative and support staff collaborating with the VI students. Being provided with the help of the above-mentioned agents, the VI student is able to function at the university environment just like the sighted students and to realize all the required material. The main educational aims of the degree courses in modern languages are equipping the VI student with a high level of linguistic proficiency, encouraging appreciation of the context in which the language operates and fostering knowledge of the cultures and societies in which the target language is used. The courses in modern languages give also an opportunity to a VI student of acquiring specialist knowledge for vocational or other purposes in the areas such as linguistics, TEFL (teaching English as a Foreign Language) and Languages for Business. Another objective of teaching modern languages courses to the VI learners is providing them with a range of related academic and professional skills for language learning that they will be able to transfer to other contexts. These skills refer to a reflection on the way they learn, both in generic and language-specific terms and transfer of the newly acquired skills to other courses they are studying. Another function of modern languages courses is encouraging the VI students to develop confidence and an independent mind. During five year long studies the VI student should develop a critical awareness that may be helpful in his future life. Finally, the last aim, though equally important as others, is enabling the VI student to conduct his own research related to his MA thesis. These educational objectives, as I mentioned before, may be fully achieved by VI students. However, sometimes some adjustments are necessary to let them attain the above aims.

3. Adjustments in the language courses materials

In the European Commission's Agency for Development in Special Education Report one may read some recommendations that should be taken into account while designing language courses for SEN students (2005: 23). The focus should be put on *cooperative team teaching* and *cooperative learning*. The former refers to teachers working together with other teachers and professionals. Frequently, it is a cooperation between a lecturer and an educational technologist who should be also an expert in special education needs. The latter, in turn, refers to the VI learners who help each other for instance by use of discussion forum within the virtual learning environment or collaborating in project work, seminars and workshops. Another recommendation is related to collaborative problem solving for all teachers. The ground rules of the course should be set collaboratively between lecturers and the students. If there is a need of individual learning or preparing an assessment plan it is agreed with the VI student and his personal tutor. The use of technology as a supporting tool is also recommended for university teachers. They may prepare lecture notes in advance in e-format. The blind students may read the notes in a computer by means of assistive technology such as speech synthesizers. The lecturer may also use a virtual learning environment to post handouts and syllabi for the courses or to share files with the students. There will be no effective teaching but for week-by-week planning of sessions, clear assessment plan and regular feedback provided to students. In the case of the VI students the lecturer may use sometimes an alternative form of assessment, for instance oral evaluation instead of a written test unless there are some procedural restrictions to do so. They may be also evaluated by means of online tests. Since both the planning of handouts in e-format and online assessment tests require time-consuming adjustments the teachers should be given some extra time for preparation of these materials. It is worth mentioning that creating accessible web pages by university teachers benefits all students, not just disabled ones. The following adjustments will allow the VI student to participate in the classes just like the sighted students.

4. Stories of two students

Theoretically speaking all the adjustments mentioned above can be implemented at universities. However, the reality of teaching the VI student may present many challenges. One of them is related to the lack of experience. In the history of English Studies Department at Wrocław University there were only two blind students. The first one, who studied over twenty years ago, did not use any assistive technology so she could mainly rely on the Braille machine and other peers who read out notes for her. The other is currently studying at the department but with a

help of a dictaphone, a book scanner and a speech synthesizer she is able to take notes in a classroom or get acquainted with the proper readings. The academic staff is not prepared for a challenge related to having the VI students in a class. Since most of the academic staff did not experience the VI students they should participate in some organized workshops on how to adopt the teaching materials or at least how to adjust their classes to the VI student's needs. Anna, a graduate of German Language Department at Cracow University, remembers her studying as a very pleasurable experience as the academic staff communicated with her by e-mail.[4] All the readings and handouts she was sent in an electronic version which she could subsequently read using speech synthesizer. She did not mind brailled materials but she found them difficult to handle because of the size and weight, thus she preferred reading them in an electronic format. Having the material in this form she could decide whether she wanted to read it or to listen to it. At the very beginning Anna was a typical low-vision student so she asked the teachers to enlarge the text for her. At the time it was obvious that there is no remedy for her disease and becoming blind is inevitable, she asked the teachers to send the texts in an e-format so as she can learn how to use a speech synthesizer. Another student's name is Artur. With the remnants of his vision he decided to continue his education at English Studies Department at UAM University in Poznań. His experience with the adaptation of materials was rather negative. At the time of his studies, the academic staff was not very supportive. There were no helpers selected by language staff who would work in collaboration with the disability office because at that time there was no such office at all. At the last two years of his studies the MA degree supervisor agreed some learning plan with him that was reviewed at regular intervals throughout the year. Apart from providing accessible documents for the VI student the academic staff may also introduce other adjustments.

They include:
- providing audio-tapes of the lectures.
- converting various Power Point presentations into rich text format and sending them to VI students via e-mail before a lecture/class took place.
- speaking clearly and directed to a class and a blackboard.
- using more descriptive language especially when referring to what is on a board, a flip chart or a screen.
- using other senses than sight to describe objects in the target language.
- experimenting with Wikki Stix to create tactile diagrams or pictures to help the VI student to describe them and engage in speaking activities.

The materials adaptation is time consuming, and it is particularly demanding for part-time or hourly-paid staff members. Thus, the whole responsibility for the learning sometimes lies in the VI student. However, the adjustments provided in the bullet points above do not require any special preparation. Frequently, both

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[4] The name I use is not real as she asked the author of the article to be anonymous.

the VI student and the sighted student equally benefit from the adjustments implemented by the university teachers. Despite the good will of the academic staff there may be still some problems related to the lack of enlarged textbooks that are necessary for the low-vision students or Braille textbooks for the blind students. Speech synthesizers may read the text but cannot describe pictures or diagrams that are in the textbooks. Unfortunately, at this point the teacher cannot do much about it. The language publishing houses prepare enlarged versions of some of the textbooks but they do not print them out in Braille as it involves very high costs. Thus, the teacher may, either order an enlarged textbook or enquire a publisher to have an e-copy produced for the blind student. That was the case with Anna who requested from the publisher a book in an electronic format and was granted with a one-user license for her to upload onto her computer. The lack of some books that could not be obtained from a publisher was compensated for by brailling parts of them or having the teacher type some parts of it. In this form the text was easily scanned and uploaded onto the laptop. Another challenge which the academic staff has to face while teaching the VI student is related to administering the assessment test. In Modern Languages Departments a student is supposed to take the final exams both in an oral and written form, and credits are frequently granted to students on the basis of Power Point presentation. Changing a written form of an exam into an oral one is not always possible. Filling in a grammar test may be replaced with an oral testing. However, it does not work for creative writing exam whose requirements do not allow for take-home procedure or a substitution of a written exam with an oral testing. In line with the tips outlined in the European Special Education Needs Report a VI candidate needs some adjustments to be introduced at an exam (2005: 184). They refer to an access to Braille papers and giving some extra time for task accomplishment. Since at Modern Languages Department there are also listening comprehension test modules, a special version of the listening test should be prepared. It is advisable to stop the tape/CD periodically to allow time for the questions to be read and answers written and checked. As to oral exams, a special version of the speaking test should be developed in which any visual prompt material is presented as a written description. The examiners may also describe all pictures or diagrams in their native language before the VI student describes them in the target language. Since at the oral exams students have usually some time to plan their speech and prepare the notes, the VI student may be allowed to resort to using a hand-held electronic brailling note-pad. This pad is the world's smallest Braille and speech personal digital assistant. The VI student should also be allowed to use a computer with appropriate software, especially at a written exam. The use of a Braille typewriter is also recommended; however there need to be a qualified academic staff able to decode the VI student's writing. The grammar tests may be either read out by the examiner and the VI students may dictate his answer or they may be converted into Braille format. The latter seems more difficult if there is no technical support from the university disability office

which could adjust the tests for SEN students. Since October 2007 there have been such an office at Wrocław University but there is no specialist staff working there who would prepare the tests in Braille. In Great Britain, at many universities there are the teaching and learning support units that help the tutors to convert test into English Braille formats. While preparing the materials in Braille one needs to be careful as the text that is in for instance English cannot be converted into Polish Braille but into English Braille. Thus, a conversion of the language specific materials into Braille should be done by specialists and proofread at least once before printing. The academic staff not supported by any specialists may have a dilemma whether they should learn how to read Braille. It seems that the VI person living in the digital century can do without the text in Braille prepared by the teachers as long as he is provided with the text in an electronic format.

5. The perception of university organization by the VI students

In the interview with two former university students I found out that the university disability offices were negatively evaluated. The staff working for the office did not have specialist knowledge on various kinds of disabilities. They were not fully involved in the work which might be put down to a social character of their function at the university. The disability offices were located in such places that the VI student could hardly locate them. According to the VI graduate students a disability office coordinator's task should not be just restricted to organizing meetings with the academic staff but also arranging the meetings with other disabled students. The task of the coordinator should be directing the VI students and not to help them out in doing what they can do on their own. The most important changes that should be implemented at university level education in order to increase a number of VI students include enhancing an awareness of academic staff about the VI student and his needs. One of the needs is being treated just like other students and not as people who make problems. An issue that deserves more attention is a library catalogue. Both my interviewees agreed that it was not accessible to the VI student. Having an electronic catalogue would solve a problem provided the special software such as speech synthesizer would be uploaded in a library computer. The interviewees explained also their point of view on access to reference materials such as dictionaries. Although it is a cross-curricular problem recognized by many VI students, the problem is compounded in a foreign language. At some exams at English Studies Department the students are allowed to consult dictionaries. For Artur that was more problematic since Braille versions of Polish-English dictionaries have about eight volumes. However, the problem was easily solved by allocating one of the staff member who looked up all the words for him. Nowadays, the departments allow hand-held talking dictionaries

based on the Language Master. Both interviewees were of the opinion that lecture recording should be a common practice for all blind and low-vision students. They complained about the approach of some lecturers who did not give them their personal consent for recording due to copyright. However, they cooperated with the students in terms of using bigger letters on a board or describing what they were writing on it. Another problem is related to informing students about office hours or test results. Artur remembers that at the time when he was studying sending information in an e-format was not widely practiced and the only way used for information dissemination was sticking it on an information board. He relied mainly on his fellow students who frequently made pranks on him telling him that he had to re-take an exam. Since he was only a low-vision student he was able to meet all the requirements set for the sighted students. He claims, however, that some of his blind fellow students, were not allowed to take an alternative form of a test as the lecturer found it too time-consuming to make any alterations to it. Anna describes the first year at the university as the uphill struggle. It was a totally new world for her, just like for the sighted students. However, the latter could easily adjust to the new conditions while she was lost in a maze of halls and doors that could be hardly recognized by her. As a result she was often late to the classes. Some academic staff was taken by surprise to have discovered the VI student at their classes. Lack of information and chaos – this is how she describes the functioning of the department where she was studying. In this case the help of fellow students is indispensable. The greatest obstacle for her was the lack of high-tech assistive technology that makes the VI student's life easier. In order to enhance the academic and technical staff awareness the Foundation Regional Development Institute issued a publication on 'Blind and Visually-impaired Students – University Handbook'.[5] The publication will undoubtedly contribute to elimination of the above-mentioned barriers.

6. Conclusions

This article has outlined the adjustments that can be made to provide equal opportunities of foreign language learning to blind and low-vision students. It has focused on the Polish educational reality as perceived by two former university students one of whom was blind and the other was severely visually impaired. They described how language staff collaborated with them and different obstacles they faced while striving to make their place in the university environment designed for sighted students. My objective was not only to provide some insights

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[5] The Foundation Regional Development Institute is a Polish non-profit organization established on August 2003. Its main objective is to transfer innovation, industriousness and supporting people with various visual impairments. Since November 2005 the foundation has been administering the project aiming at increasing an access of visual impaired people to various professions.

on the issue of accessibility of Polish university education to blind and low-vision people but also to point to some action plan for future adjustments including adaptation of the language materials or staff training in terms of raising their awareness about the needs of their students. Having the VI student on a university course, especially for the first time, is a great challenge for all the academic staff. What should be remembered is that the VI student will always demonstrate an obvious preference for aural/oral skills. Nevertheless, reading and writing skills should not be neglected. These two skills are quite challenging for the VI student, particularly in time-constraint situations such as a test or a seminar. However, one needs to consider that a graduate of Modern Languages department needs to master all four skills. Hence, the VI student needs to fulfill the same requirements that are for the sighted student. The way these two types of students meet the requirements may be, however, adjusted to their individual needs. What the staff should remember about is that there are some things that are particularly effective in creating a safe environment in which the VI student can develop his linguistic potential. This refers not only to academic staff but also to technicians, librarians, and administrative staff. The most important issue is providing the VI student with support and a personal tutor who should extend his knowledge on disability issues, especially on various visual impairments and the VI student's needs. The knowledge is not just necessary for a personal tutor but also for other academic staff members. In this way they will understand why the blind student finds some languages, as German for instance, more difficult to learn than others.[6] It will also help them comprehend the nature of the learning/teaching process. Many VI students suffer from information overload more than other sighted students as they can only process the language *via* hearing, listening and speaking compensating in this way for the lack of sight. Dedicated support of a university disability office coordinator or the teaching and learning support unit may also be helpful, especially in the materials adjustment. It seems crucial to raise awareness among, not just the academic staff but also other university students, on the importance of creating accessible materials both for the benefit of the VI students and as a professional skill. Finally, the stress should be put on collaborative group work.

References

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Alliance for Technology Access (online http://www.ataccess.org/about/principles.html)
Data of Główny Urząd Statystyczny [General Statistical Office] (online www.gus.pl)

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[6] The interviewees agreed that German is a tremendously difficult language to learn, especially to the blind learner, because of its complex structure that requires the memorization of various patterns.