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## “Listen and Touch” Project — A Critical Look at Various Ways of L2 Vocabulary Teaching to the Students with Vision Deficit

### 1. Introduction

Foreign language teaching to the visually impaired (VI) learners is a subject on which not much has been done systematically for a long time. Many language teachers working with this type of learners have problems with choosing the right approaches and methods for teaching. Frequently, they rely on their own intuition and inventiveness. In the last decade the European Commission funded two major projects aimed at increasing the potential of VI students for FL learning and raising awareness of FL teachers working within special education needs (SEN) setting, specifically those teaching the learners with vision deficit. The first concerns the implementation of the European Portfolio for the Visually Impaired and Blind Learners (ELPVIB) launched in the several European countries, however still unavailable in the Polish version. The main intention of the ELPVIB is to increase the VI students' motivation to FL learning, to enhance their autonomy in the learning process by, among others, self-assessment of their progress. Currently, the document is available in the English, German, Bulgarian and Greek version. Still, to my knowledge, there are not any formal projects on the effectiveness of the ELPVIB in this specific SEN setting. The second, called “Listen and Touch” Project, is funded by the European Commission, Directorate General for Education and Culture. It is the framework of Socrates Programme: Lingua 2 — Development of Language Tools and Materials. The content of the final publication entitled *Methodology of Teaching a Foreign Language to the Blind* is the sole responsibility of the project partners and does not represent the views of the European Commission and its services. The publication is in a form of bullet point guidelines enu-

merating various techniques of teaching four language skills and language aspects, such as lexis, grammar and structures, and pronunciation.

The present article is the author's attempt to look critically at various ways of vocabulary teaching recommended in the above-mentioned guidelines, pointing to their advantages and disadvantages. In this analysis the author refers to both her own hands-on experience and the expertise of the experienced in-service senior teachers teaching English and German to the visually impaired learners.

The first section provides a brief introduction to understanding the background and preparation needed for teaching foreign languages to the blind learners. A cognitive development is thoroughly discussed since it is essential for understanding the limitations of the VI learner, particularly his/her problems with vocabulary acquisition. The second section explores language teaching in more depth focusing on various L2 vocabulary teaching techniques and examples of good practice from experienced teachers of English.

## 2. Understanding the background of teaching VI learners

### 2.1. A preparatory phase

Any preparatory course requires from the teacher some knowledge on specificity of his/her learners. Raising awareness of the FL teacher working in the SEN setting should be the first step prior to lesson implementation. An effective language teacher uses a wide variety of methods and approaches to cater for individual needs of the student. It seems crucial to understand the four main modalities of learning styles and to ensure that they are all addressed in a teaching programme. The overwhelming majority of sighted people are visual learners and FL coursebooks and resources rely heavily on the use of picture. Despite these facts, there is no reason for neglecting the four modalities in teaching a foreign language to the VI learners. Many learners with a vision deficit, even a total lack of sight, possess excellent visualisation skills, which may be used in various class activities.

Planning a lesson before teaching normally sighted learners is an important and time consuming stage, especially for pre-service and freshman teachers. It is even more demanding for the teachers working with special education needs learners such as these with a partial or total lack of vision. Preparation is essential to ensure quality of provision and to meet the individual needs of the visually impaired student. In the Polish SEN reality there are many factors which need to be addressed, such as the resources available for foreign language teaching, the confines of physical buildings, or financial restraints.

Prior to commencing a lesson a foreign language teacher should have an insight into an individual learner's report to establish his/her clinical diagnosis of eye condition. There are numerous disorders of the eye, some of them being more rare

than others. A diagnosis will enable the teacher to prepare effectively for teaching. In the case of the totally blind students the sight loss is too severe for the Snellen Test Chart.<sup>1</sup> However, in many individuals light perception may be recorded, which may be used in teaching, for example in explaining directions. In the learners with a partial sight loss it is essential to know an extent to which vision has been retained, which should be taken into consideration in the process of teaching resources preparation. A clinical diagnosis may indicate what print size is necessary for a given learner. This may relate either to the N-size chart or a computer font style and size (for example Verdana, 24). The consequences of sight loss may be related either to loss of visual acuity or loss of visual field.<sup>2</sup> In the most drastic situations the student may suffer from both loss of visual acuity and loss of field. This means that not only clarity is lost, but also images may be incomplete or blurred.

Having established a clinical diagnosis of the eye condition, the teacher should determine a communication medium favoured by the VI learner. In the case of the totally blind student materials must be prepared in Braille.<sup>3</sup> There is a wide variety of sources and FL educational texts which may be used in teaching. The FL teacher should know at least the basics of Braille to be able to prepare tests and to decipher the student's answers. Learning a foreign language is more successful when it takes place within the timeframes of the critical period.<sup>4</sup> It seems to me that this statement is equally applicable to Braille learning. The majority of adult learners who strive to master Braille are doomed to failure since their tactile perceptual abilities have been activated after the critical point. However, the FL teacher may be very successful in visual Braille reading. Undoubtedly, time constraints hinder many FL teachers from preparing materials in Braille.

While learning a written representation of an English word, the VI learner needs to master the Standard English Braille, which consists of two grades. In the first grade there are no contractions and every word is spelt out letter by letter in the Braille symbols. In the second grade, which is much more complex, the learner is supposed to use around two hundred contractions. Additional symbols are used for accents and other letters from foreign languages which are not normally found in the English language.<sup>5</sup> A full mastery in grade 2 requires much effort on the part

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<sup>1</sup> The Snellen Test Chart is a common method used for a clinical diagnosis of eye condition. 6/6 means good vision while 5/50 would suggest that the student was only able to see an image at 5 metres, whereas a person with average, good vision would see at 50 metres.

<sup>2</sup> Loss of visual acuity happens when the sharpness and clarity of vision is lost with the student being unable to see fine details. Loss of visual field, in turn, refers to the situation in which the field of vision is restricted and areas are lost to the student.

<sup>3</sup> Braille is a series of embossed dots combined to represent the letters of the alphabet, numbers, punctuation marks and other print symbols.

<sup>4</sup> A critical period hypothesis for language acquisition appeared for the first time in Eric Lenneberg's book entitled *Biological Foundations of Language* (1967).

<sup>5</sup> There are also specialist Braille symbols for mathematics and music.

of the learner, however in the long run his/her rate of writing may be comparable to this of a normally sighted person.

Another medium of communication used by learners with the total lack of sight is Moon. It resembles Braille since there are also raised dots but in Moon they are based on the standard alphabet. Moon includes symbols, curves and straight lines devised from the Roman alphabet. However, FL teachers should know that materials are not easily available in Moon. Many adult learners find Moon easier to master than Braille as do those with poor sensitivity in fingers. There are also screen readers and CDs that may be used for lesson preparation. The provision of good resources is integral to all teaching. In the case of the VI students resources are essential tools that support learning. It is necessary to note that an expensive resource does not have to be the most appropriate and the VI student should have an opportunity to experiment with various types of resources (e.g. computer programmes).

Prior educational or training history of the VI learner should be also recognized by the teacher. The learner's educational experience will provide information for the FL teacher on what support services are appropriate. The FL teacher should also have the knowledge of the cognitive development of his/her VI student, which is essential in teaching L2 vocabulary.

## 2.2. Cognition and L2 vocabulary teaching

The acquisition of words and their meanings by blind children has been a controversial topic in the field of linguistics. It has been argued that blind children unlike their sighted counterparts "give different, often unreal, meanings to words" (Perez-Pereira and Conti-Ramsden 2006: 72).

The data from the studies of blind children have drawn into a debate on the relation between cognitive development and language acquisition. If language acquisition is in any way related to and dependent on cognitive development, any factor such as loss of sight should affect language. This view point presented by Piaget was not supported by Chomsky taking an opposed standpoint (Piattelli-Palmarini 1980: 171). In the debate directed specifically to blind children, Chomsky supported his argument claiming that they are not delayed or deviant in their language acquisition. However, this claim seems to be exaggerated in view of various findings (Cromer 1973; Ochaita et al. 1986). The researchers do not so much disagree on the fact that a difference exists between sighted and blind children, but on its significance. Some of these differences involve a language delay compared with sighted children, others an alternative path in language development. As Nikolic (1987) states, there are some psychometric tests showing that the cognitive development of visually impaired and sighted children is similar if the former are educated appropriately and at the right time. According to Bishop (2004: 164), in turn, "there is no sufficient evidence from

blind children to prove that experience determines language learning or to what extent language is steered by cognitive development, and whether input is a central factor in acquisition or only peripheral.”

However, if we consider the point of view that the lack of vision has some impact on first language acquisition, consequently, it will also have an impact on foreign language learning. If a given concept was not acquired properly by a blind child, its equivalent in a foreign language will also have an inappropriate mental representation. Differences in understanding concepts by the blind children are already manifested at the level of language they use (use of pretend play, development of role-play, development of fantasies, comprehension of fairy tales and stories).

What may pose a problem to a blind child are locational terms. Bigelow and Bryan (1982) for example noticed that in the acquisition of *in*, *on* and *under* the blind children were able to place an object in relation to themselves more quickly than two objects in relation to one another. The interpretation of prepositions such as *in front of* and *before the speaker*, which is determined by the nature of the object, is also difficult to understand by the blind children (Bishop and Mogford 2004: 159). Other problems with language use enumerated by Bishop concern overextension and underextension of various word categories, spatial deictic terms (this and that, here and there), sighted terms („see” and „look” are frequently used in a sense of “haptically be aware of” and “haptically explore”). The language of the blind people is frequently characterized with *verbalism* which refers to the use of language without the back-up of concrete experience. The problems with cause-and-effect relationship may reveal the VI person’s insufficient background knowledge.

From the above-mentioned deliberations there are some methodological implications for FL teaching. The FL teacher should have the awareness that teaching a new L2 lexical item involves making sure whether the learner properly understands a given concept in his/her native language. When an L2 word refers to a concept for which a proper mental representation in the blind student’s mind has been already developed during first language acquisition, the FL teacher does not need to draw a special attention to this concept. If the VI student is not familiar with a given concept still it is possible by means of various techniques to explain it. However, it is far more difficult for the FL teacher to change an incorrect mental representation of a concept which has been deeply rooted in the student’s mind during first language acquisition.

For the reasons mentioned above the FL teacher should apply the “feel and touch” techniques that are highly relevant to the learner with visual impairments. In this way he/she comprehends the concepts in more physical terms than the sighted student. Even a good auditory commentary cannot guarantee the student will visualise a totally new object. An introduction of the physical object enables understanding to be complete.

Finally, it is necessary to notice that there may be some cognitive aspects that make the VI person superior to the sighted learner. One of them is good verbal memory which is manifested in the VI student's ability to remember a number of concrete experiences related to his/her own life, sequences of instructions and explanations being so essential in mobility.

### 3. Teaching vocabulary to the VI learners

Teaching L2 vocabulary to the VI learners presents a great challenge to every language teacher. Undoubtedly, it stimulates the teacher's creativity since there is little theoretical background on this specific problem. As Nikolic (1987: 67) notices "any proposals for special treatment in separate institutions arouse fears of segregation and run counter to the school of thought that emphasizes that foreign languages should be taught to the blind and visually impaired children entirely within the framework of the curriculum applied in mainstream schools." However, there may be also another factor that hinders research in the area of foreign language teaching to the VI learners such as the common myth that learning a foreign language is beyond their abilities. A counter argument to this view may be the fact that a language is learned mainly by the sense of hearing and not by the sense of seeing. There are many factors which predetermine success with the VI learners learning foreign languages: enthusiasm, the lack of self-consciousness, deep concentration, excellent memory, and good hearing. As Dean (1992) notices, it is important for the VI students to feel challenged by the task which they are set, otherwise their self-esteem will decrease. For the VI learners learning L2 vocabulary is viewed as a new experience. They treat it, as Nikolic (1987: 89) claims, as a true form of education: the discovery of the unknown. Presenting L2 vocabulary is of vital importance for the VI learners as the teacher is often the only source of new words. There are no Braille dictionaries available in all the world languages, but even if the VI student had an access to them consulting them could be a time consuming and frustrating operation.

#### 3.1. The use of realia

By the use of realia the meaning of an L2 word may be conveyed. Realia do not only create interest but they are also a direct way of introducing a concept. Thus, a set of three boxes of different size and materials can be used to make students understand such notions as: a box, a square shape, hard and soft, smooth and rough, heavy and light, comparatives and superlatives (big, bigger, the biggest), or left and right. As it has been mentioned above, the prepositions of location pose a great problem to the VI learner. The concepts such as *in front of*, *behind*, *between* or *under* should be introduced with an interval in between so that they are not confused by the learners.



It should be emphasized that teaching new concepts by means of realia to the VI students is in many respects different from this done to their sighted counterparts.

It is much more time consuming to present an object to the blind student. The FL teacher working in the SEN setting with the VI learners needs to have a physical contact with his/her students. It is necessary for the teacher to inform the VI learner before touching him/her and placing an object in his/her hands. The teacher needs to introduce an object saying "Now, I am going to put a certain object in your hands. Then I would like you to smell it. Are you ready for it?"

Presenting an object by means of realia requires from the FL teacher a greater involvement than it is in the case of the sighted learners. The teacher has to monitor constantly what the blind student is doing with an object. If instead of touching a model of a house the VI learner turns it upside down, the FL teacher needs to react immediately. In many objects the blind student is however allowed to experience their structure, smell, and even shake or drop them. In this L2 vocabulary presentation technique the teacher has a role of a facilitator who may even take the blind student's hand directing his/her fingers, pressing the forefinger onto for example a ball and saying "soft." This action needs to be repeated at least twice so that a new lexical item will be given an appropriate mental representation. At a practice stage the student may pass on the ball to his peer neighbour repeating a word "soft." This chain activity takes much time but eventually the students realise the meaning of a word. For these students who are at the end of the chain it is a good pre-teaching activity. The new lexical items can be practised with other words the students already know e.g. a soft pillow, a hard board, etc. The FL teacher may also introduce coins, Braille calendars or tickets from the target language countries. There is also another way of introducing realia in which the students are taught new vocabulary outside a classroom, for example in a park, open markets and shops. In a naturalistic setting the VI learners can learn much faster such vocabulary as "wind," "snow," "a bus stop" or "a car." However, there are some arguments against these "class out" sessions. Firstly, such a class needs to be planned in advance to ensure safety to all the students. Secondly, it requires some support from assistants who should be in charge of one or two students. Since in the Polish SEN reality the teacher's assistants are not available for every pair of students, the teacher can introduce new vocabulary taking just two students out and leaving the rest of the class under the assistant's supervision.

Undoubtedly, the use of realia is of great value for the learners with vision deficit since it enhances their motivation and interest in a foreign language. Presentation of new vocabulary by means of realia is also beneficial for these VI learners who are prone to "mannerisms" such as body rocking or eye rubbing. An active involvement in various stages of a lesson (presentation or practice TPR activities) reduces to a considerable degree stereotypical behaviour. However, from the teacher's perspective the presentation of L2 vocabulary by means of realia requires some effort and good classroom management skills.

### 3.2. Using body

Using body for introducing L2 vocabulary may be also as effective in the SEN setting as realia. There is a common myth that the teacher working with the blind learners should not rely on non-verbal clues. The statement may be applicable for the instructions provided to learners, however there are absolutely no reasons for refraining from body use in teaching L2 vocabulary. In order to convey a word meaning the FL teacher may use gestures, facial expressions and actions, which should be used in combination with sounds. In presentation of various actions sounds come naturally and all that the FL teacher has to do is to exaggerate them, even if in real life we usually tend to suppress them, e.g. the sounds we produce while drinking, eating, running, jumping, etc. There are many verbs which, if the culture allows, may be demonstrated through a physical contact, e.g. to squeeze, to pat, to grasp. An action should be demonstrated with each individual student, who in turn should practice a verb with his/her neighbouring peer. It should be noticed that there are some VI students who dislike this type of physical contact since they identify it with help provided to them in everyday life. Thus, in this case it seems justified to convey a meaning of a verb in a different way, for example by translation.

Tones of voice can be also introduced in a classroom, which are maybe not central to the meaning of a word, however they convey attitude and intention of a speaker. Harmer (2001: 33) distinguishes five tones of voice: whispering (to indicate the need for secrecy), breathiness (to show deep emotion), huskiness (to show unimportance or disparagement), nasality (it indicates anxiety), and extra lip rounding (to express greater intimacy, especially with babies). A sentence "I have finished!" can be pronounced in many ways to mean "I am happy" (with a smile), "I am tired" (with a sigh), or "I am excited" (with rubbing the hands at the same time). All the above-mentioned tones of voice can be used successfully with both the sighted and visually impaired learners.

The use of voice tones for conveying a word meaning will not be favoured equally by all FL teachers. The inhibited, introverted teachers would rather rely on a word translation than the use of Total Physical Response (TPR) techniques. An effective way of conveying a meaning of a new lexical item may be a combination of TPR techniques and a translation. For example, a teacher who explains a word "bored" may use a puffing sound and then provide the learners with an equivalent of the word in the students' native language. Very productive is a so-called *sandwich technique* in which after elicitation of a word "bored" the teacher would say "bored," then provide a native word for "bored," and finally repeat "bored."

The FL teacher working with the blind students should teach L2 vocabulary not only by means of a kinaesthetic mode but also an olfactory channel related to smelling and a gustatory channel based on using a sense of taste. Smell and



taste may be used for presenting L2 vocabulary related to food (butter, bread, ham, cheese, tea). Adjectives such as "sour," "sweet," "bitter," or "salty" may be also introduced by taste. The majority of blind people know the colours of various fruit, vegetables and some food. The FL teacher may practice with the VI learner the names and colours of food products in a "what is it" guess game in which the student tastes bits of food and gives its colour.

Many FL teachers refrain from using a sense of taste and smell though these are the best ways for their VI learners to experience environment. It should be noticed, however, that the blind students are much better at identifying various objects by smell and taste than their teachers, e.g. they can smell paper.

### 3.3. Sound pictures

As it has been stressed above, the educational system is mainly based on visual stimuli. Thus FL coursebooks present vocabulary through pictures. Audio presentation of L2 vocabulary is not popular. However, it should be more appreciated by the FL teacher working in the SEN setting since the VI learners can derive much more information from this type of input than his/her sighted counterpart. Cross (1991: 10) noticed "many words are more easily presented by a sound recording than by the ways already presented. The noises of an argument, a jet plane, a locomotive, a horse galloping, children splashing in water, a river gurgling, and so on, are easily obtained, or created." There are some issues that need to be discussed at this stage. Firstly, the importance of sounds in the learning process is unquestionable. Sound effects create in the blind student's mind an impression of various actions, places and people. The blind person's world to a great extent consists of "sound pictures." He is able to grasp even the slightest differences between the sounds. Secondly, since he is so sensitive to sounds, which he approaches in a very analytical way, it is difficult for the FL teacher to prepare appropriate sound recordings. Some of them are available on the Internet and can be easily downloaded in the mp3 format. There are, however, many sounds which cannot be easily accessed and the FL teacher needs to record them on his/her own. Some sounds seem to be similar for the normally sighted person (e.g. a sound of a hair dryer and sounds made by a plane), however a difference between them may be easily detected by the VI learner. Since various sounds may evoke various images, it is essential for the FL teacher to elicit information from the blind students about their interpretation of a sound. In a very natural way a presentation of a given lexical item by means of sound gives rise to exchanging points of view and expressing ideas in a target language. A sound is used not only as a starting point for provoking ideas before a class discussion but also for writing a story or role play. In a brainstorming activity the FL teacher may introduce many words related to the main vocabulary item. For example, a sound picture of "storm" can help elicit such words as "thunder," "rain," "lightening," or "fear," which in turn may serve

as a basis for a sentence, a paragraph, or a whole story. The BBC World Service offers a very useful activity in one of their teaching programmes which can be used by the FL teacher for group or individual work. In the recording one may find a sequence of three sounds made by a car that pulls up and stops, footsteps that are heard, and finally gunshots and the sound of broken glass. The similar sequences of sounds may be recorded by the FL teacher. It requires from him/her, however, some effort and creativity, which will be undoubtedly appreciated by the blind learner.

### 3.4. Other L2 vocabulary presentation techniques

The techniques which have been described above might be difficult in implementation, especially when the FL teacher does not have much experience in teaching or insufficient knowledge about the SEN setting. A selection of a particular technique also depends to a great extent on a specificity of the VI learners. The factors that should be considered are time and onset of the visual handicap, verbalism, or level of cognitive development which may hinder a proper concept comprehension. Some FL teachers treat translation as the most unfailing technique of L2 vocabulary presentation. It seems to be justified especially if one considers such an aspect as time constraints. However, with the VI learners translation is not always as successful as it is with the normally sighted learners. The former may have problems with mental representations of some concepts in their native language.

Introducing words in a context is of invaluable help for all the learners regardless of their deficits. David Cross introduces the term “words of special value” for words which have “immediate value for use in the classroom for activities and for talking about students’ own lives and interests” (11). In introducing new words the FL teacher can use generally known facts and personalities, e.g. The Queen of England lives in a castle. However, it needs to be noticed that there is not always one to one correspondence between the commonly shared knowledge of the normally sighted learners and their partially or totally blind counterparts. The latter have problems with building up certain images, especially these related to airplanes, rare species, spaceships or film stars.

Linguistic definitions may also be applied by the FL teacher. They should be introduced quite early and as much as possible, so that the VI learner can learn to derive meaning of a word from explanations. Early exposure to word definitions helps the VI learner develop strategies for grasping the meaning and asking for further clarification. These abilities are very useful in contacts with native speakers of a target language in which the blind person relies entirely on explanation of unfamiliar words or phrases. It needs to be stressed that when being abroad these unfamiliar items cannot be so easily looked up in a Braille dictionary. It should be stressed that linguistic definitions do not work with all the VI learners. These who are inhibited and do not give feedback to the teacher on how much they have

understood may find explanations very confusing. Thus, there is a great role of the FL teacher who should encourage these VI learners, paraphrasing the definition, or using a word in a context, or even providing an equivalent of an L2 item in their native language.

#### 4. Final thoughts

In the SEN setting the FL teacher wrestles all the time with ups and downs in his/her motivation. The techniques which work successfully with the sighted students may turn out to be a failure in the case of the partially sighted or totally blind learners. Since there is the lack of resources for the FL teachers working with this category of learners, they have to rely on inventiveness and intuition. "Listen and touch" project ended with a set of guidelines for FL teachers. However, before implementing any techniques one needs first to recognize a potential of the VI learner, his/her personality, prior experience and shared knowledge.

The most important aspect of a word presentation is making sure that the VI person has a proper mental representation of this word in a native language.

From the above deliberations it may be deduced that theory is frequently far from practice and many techniques, though being invaluable for the VI learners, are not implemented because they are effort and time consuming for the FL teacher.

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