

Teaching English to Visually Impaired Learners

Session 1. Understanding your Learners

Introduction

Languages are the most important tool we have to communicate among societies, cultures and people. Thus, it can be considered a right for humanity to have access to language regardless of necessity or impairment.

Language development takes time until a person becomes fully communicative, however we can communicate with just one word or a whole sentence.

[It is often discussed](#) whether a person with a disability is capable of developing communication skills in a foreign language. Nevertheless, it is beyond doubt that most humans successfully develop linguistic skills in their mother tongue (as long as the disability allows for linguistic growth).

Considering that a foreign language is acquired in the same way as a mother tongue, is it appropriate, then, to believe that an impaired speaker cannot develop a foreign language?

So, bearing this in mind, a first and subsequent languages can be learned as follows: first, we listen and then we produce, then, we decode these sounds into words, and finally we are ready to code them again into our writing system.

How to learn a language

- FIRST, WE LISTEN, THEN WE SPEAK (RECEPTIVE VS PRODUCTIVE ORAL SKILLS)
- FIRST, WE READ, THEN WE WRITE (RECEPTIVE VS PRODUCTIVE WRITTEN SKILLS)

This is an essential part of the learning process of every language. However, it is important to point out that it will take longer when learning a foreign language as it will be influenced by:

- the age of the learner.
- non-natural learning contexts.
- differences between L1 and L2 in terms of grammar, structures, lexis etc.
- the learner's motivation.

These aspects are exacerbated when students have an impairment, such as blindness and/or deaf blindness. Language learning is also often supported by visual resources, which are not

readily accessible to visually impaired learners. Thus, while learning a foreign language is possible, we need to adapt the learning process to support our students' needs.

How do we teach a foreign language to visually impaired students?

- Evaluate the level of language development of both the mother tongue (L1) and foreign language (FL or L2). It is not appropriate to ask for more content in a FL than the actual content they have in their mother tongue.
- Set realistic objectives in time and in progress.
- Be conscious (and positive) of the extra time students need to develop in a FL what they already know in their mother tongue.
- Adapt the material to their needs.

The process of learning a FL is the same as learning a mother tongue. Brains create different neural pathways depending on their needs and abilities. Thus, blind students will need to follow the same process: listening, speaking, reading, writing but they will probably need to add tactile or extra information (even translation).

Communicative competence: the goal while teaching a language

Communication is the main objective when we speak a language. This communication is not achieved if students are not grouped. This is why nobody should doubt the possibility of a visual impaired student studying within a group. However, when visually impaired students are included in groups, teachers need to focus on adaptations and needs in order to make their inclusion beneficial and positive for the whole class.

We need to set realistic objectives for the group and for each student, but the main goal we need to achieve is communicative competence among the students. This will be achieved when all students are taught according to their needs and strengths.

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