

# Teaching English to Visually Impaired Learners

## Session 3. The Learner in the Classroom: Organisation, Materials and Activities

### Adapting Tasks and Materials

Teaching visually impaired students means having to adapt some learning materials. The main goal is to keep the same information as in the original material or document.

When teaching English, we are likely to come across many visual documents and resources. Thus, we need to make those images understandable and accessible to visually impaired students.

Below we can see some examples of activities for each linguistic skill (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and how to adapt them. There are also special items for grammar and vocabulary. Nonetheless, these are examples and not the only way to adapt activities. **We must consider what the objective of each task is in order to adapt the material with that objective in mind.**

## Listening and speaking

Listening activities might include images and visual aspects that support the learners' understanding of the audio. **These images need to be described in the learner's language.** By doing so, the description will support the blind learner's understanding in a similar way to how the image supports a sighted learner. The image wouldn't have this support function if it were described in a foreign language.

Moreover, when the aim of the task is to elicit vocabulary, the description must be in the learner's language.

When images do not have an impact on comprehension, it is advisable not to describe them so as not to overwhelm the students with extra information.

This also applies to speaking activities where you need to talk about visual information. The images should be described in the learner's language and the description should be as accurate as possible.

Example:

In listening activities, a possible task may involve matching information from one column to another. In this case, matching is not accessible, so we need to adapt the format of the activity and organize the information in another way. In the following example, we can find that matching activity, as well as a previous one related to images.



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## Possible adaptation:

- **Activity 8:** Images should be described in the learner's language if they are necessary for the objective of the activity. There may be other visual information that is not relevant, however, in this case the images A - G need a description.
- **Activity 9:** The matching activity can be done as well, although visually impaired (low vision or totally blind) students will find it difficult to match. Lines might interfere with their sight and information can be acquired partially then. It is better to break down the options into two groups or label the items in one column with letters and the other with numbers so they can identify there are two sets of groups.

Another listening activity, such as the following one, may appear easier to adapt as students just need to say whether the sentences are true or false, but it is important to consider how the page design can affect accessibility.

EXAMPLE:

■ I can understand and discuss growth and fixed mindsets.
■ I can understand a discussion about everyday accomplishments.

**8. PREPARE TO LISTEN**

Read the information in the infographic. What are the main differences between a growth mindset and a fixed mindset?

**GROWTH MINDSET**

*I like challenges.  
I never give up.  
I can learn from failures.  
I don't let obstacles get in my way.  
I can.  
I like to try new things.*

**FIXED MINDSET**

*I avoid challenges.  
I give up easily.  
I don't like failing.  
Difficulties often get the better of me.  
I can't.  
I stick to what I know.*

**9. LISTEN TO THE LESSON (PART 1)**

Listen to the teacher introducing a lesson. What's the lesson about? Why does the teacher mention the famous people?

**Exam skills > Listening**

**Identifying the type of answer required**

Before you listen, read the question carefully and try to guess what type of information you'll need to listen for. Is it the main idea or a specific detail? Is it a positive or a negative choice? Is it a fact or an opinion?

**10. LISTEN TO THE LESSON (PART 2)**

Listen to the second part of the lesson. What challenge or problem does each person mention? How did they show a growth mindset?

**11. LISTEN AGAIN**

Listen again to the whole lesson. Decide if the sentences are true or false. Write T or F.

1. The teacher had a problem during his lesson. <input type="radio"/>	4. Samir likes maths now. <input type="radio"/>
2. The teacher had never fixed a problem computer before. <input type="radio"/>	5. Lyra had been interested in skateboarding for a long time. <input type="radio"/>
3. Samir studied extra maths twice a week. <input type="radio"/>	6. Lyra wanted to become a pilot. <input type="radio"/>

4
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We can take the following into account in this example:

Exercise 8 pre-reading task

The concepts associated with growth and fixed mindset at the beginning of the lesson are divided into two coloured shapes to help the students to understand the meaning of the words/expressions they need to use and identify in the listening task. We should bear in mind:

1. Is the information written in the shapes read by a screen reader or in the Braille version? (this depends on whether the page is accessible by design).
2. Is the information written inside the visual clear to low-vision learners? Take into account the red and green background colours, background-text colour contrast and font type.

3. Can we present the information in another way? E.g. each concept on a slip of paper. A sighted learner reads each one to their visually impaired peer and together they decide whether it refers to a Growth or Fixed Mindset.

Overall page design:

- The organisation is presented in different tables or spaces, but they do not necessarily follow the order of the lesson. Sighted learners automatically focus on the elements on the page in a logical order, but a screen reader or Braille version may present the elements 'out of order' depending on the page design. This will be the case with materials that are not accessible by design. E.g. the "Exam skills. Listening tip" in yellow is eye-catching and stands out on the page, but when reading in Braille it may appear in the middle of the various listening tasks and the students can feel disoriented.
- This page contains many different colours, shapes and sizes, which can be tiring for students when looking for information.

## Reading and writing

These skills are easier to adapt, although there are some aspects to consider. For example, with the different task types:

- **OPEN questions:** they do not normally need adaptation apart from giving enough space for the answer.
- **TRUE or FALSE questions:** they do not need adaptation, although the questions/answers might appear in charts. In this case, we need to delete the chart, give blank gaps for the answers and increase the size of the words and space. Some charts might be read by a screen reader such as JAWS and with a Braille display, but it is important to check this beforehand.
- **ACCOMPANYING VISUALS:** Teachers need to assess whether or not they are essential for task comprehension or simply decorative and ensure that essential visuals are accessible.


### Examples:

- **SEARCHING FOR WORDS IN THE TEXT:** Imagine a question like the following one:

'Look for a synonym of the word *school* in line 6'


Teachers will need to check whether that line corresponds to the actual line 6 when adapting the text to Braille or when the letters are enlarged as the line numbering may be altered.

- **IMAGES IN WRITING ACTIVITIES:** They are normally complementary information to the task but are not related to the aim of the activity itself. Thus, the description of these images is not always essential. As we can find in the next instance:


**1. PREPARE TO READ**


**Follow the steps.**

1. Read the definition of *superstition*.
2. Look at the pictures in the article. **DON'T** read the article yet. Can you guess what the superstitions might be?

**superstition**



**noun** (c/u) /su:'pə'stɪʃən/  
something people believe that cannot be explained by science, but is often connected to the idea of luck

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**2. READ THE ARTICLE**

**Check your ideas from activity 1. Did you guess any of the superstitions correctly?**

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**3. READ AGAIN**


**Match the beginnings of the superstitions (1–5) to their endings (a–e). Write a–e.**  
**Which country does each superstition come from?**

1. Never give flowers	<input type="radio"/>	a. if they don't want a beard.
2. You shouldn't cut your fingernails	<input type="radio"/>	b. if you want to be successful.
3. Women shouldn't eat goats' meat	<input type="radio"/>	c. in a group of four.
4. Hold a ladybird	<input type="radio"/>	d. if you want to be healthy.
5. Wear green at New Year	<input type="radio"/>	e. on a Saturday.

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**4. EXPLORE VOCABULARY**

**Look at the words in bold in the article. Try to guess the meaning and pronunciation of any new words, and then check in a dictionary.**



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However, when the image is a model of the text we need to write, it is important to describe the image to give information to the students about the register and style of the writing and transcribe the text, so they can read it.

# This is where I live

I'm learning how to write about myself and where I live.

**18 Scan the email and answer the questions.**

- Where's Lahcen from?
- What's he looking forward to next month?

Start an email to a new penpal with words like 'Hi' or 'Hello'.

Introduce yourself.

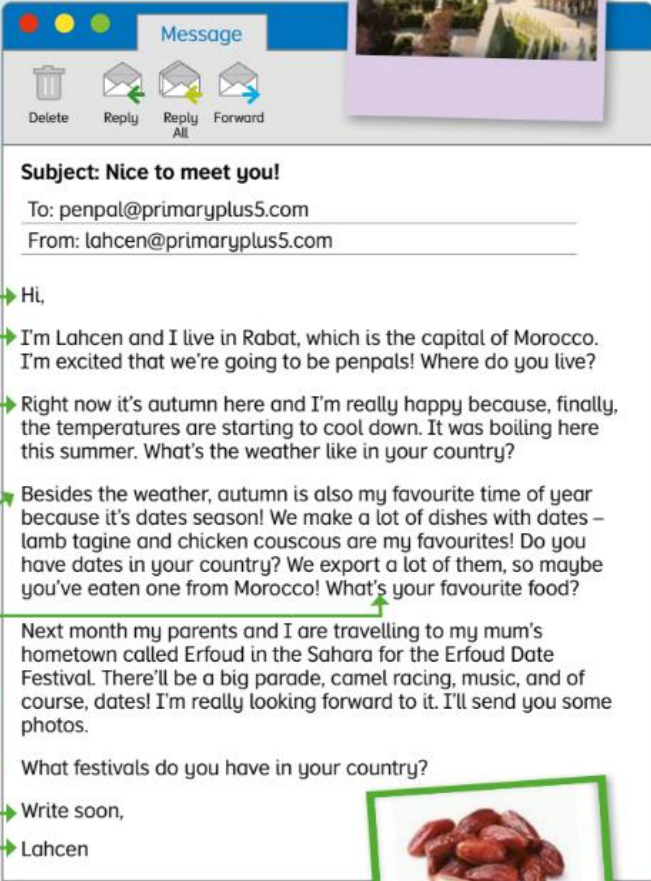
Start a new paragraph for a new topic.

Share facts about where you live and your life.

Ask questions.

Close your email with a phrase like 'Write soon' or 'Best wishes'.

Write your name under the closing phrase.



**Message**

Delete Reply Reply All Forward

**Subject: Nice to meet you!**

To: penpal@primaryplus5.com

From: lahcen@primaryplus5.com

Hi,

I'm Lahcen and I live in Rabat, which is the capital of Morocco. I'm excited that we're going to be penpals! Where do you live?

Right now it's autumn here and I'm really happy because, finally, the temperatures are starting to cool down. It was boiling here this summer. What's the weather like in your country?


Besides the weather, autumn is also my favourite time of year because it's dates season! We make a lot of dishes with dates – lamb tagine and chicken couscous are my favourites! Do you have dates in your country? We export a lot of them, so maybe you've eaten one from Morocco! What's your favourite food?

Next month my parents and I are travelling to my mum's hometown called Erfoud in the Sahara for the Erfoud Date Festival. There'll be a big parade, camel racing, music, and of course, dates! I'm really looking forward to it. I'll send you some photos.

What festivals do you have in your country?

Write soon,

Lahcen



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**8**

### POSSIBLE ADAPTATION:

The activity above shows a model of an email. It is important to describe the shape, format and organisation of the text, as well as related it to the written tips that appear in the bubbles beside it.

## General material adaptation: vocabulary and grammar

- 3D models and materials with different layers and shapes are important to complement visual information, as well as to avoid translation to the learner's language.
- **BLACKBOARD/WHITEBOARD USE:** This resource is mainly visual and if we use it, we need to describe everything we write on it. This description should be done orally, and we need to give time to the students to process that information and even to write it down. For further information you can read the document "Boards and digital books" of this course.
- When talking about specific **VOCABULARY** and we do not want to use the student's language, it is advisable to give them a list of the lexical set and their translation in advance. This way, when we are talking about those particular words in class, our visually impaired student will be able to understand the concepts while the rest of the group are learning by relating words to images, for instance.
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# Our favourite toys

I'm learning words to describe toys.

**1** Look at the toys. Say which material(s) each one is made from. Which one do you think is the most eco-friendly? Why?

cardboard	cloth	metal	paper	plastic
plastic bottle	rubber	wood	wool	



origami elephant



kite



toy snake



action figure



board game



building bricks



cuddly toy



recycled toy



toy car

**2** Which materials do you think are the most and least used to make toys? Why?

Lots of toys are made from ... because ...

You don't see many ... toys because ...

## POSSIBLE ADAPTATION

In this example, and depending on the level we are teaching, it would be advisable to use realia when introducing the new words. As the new words appear next to the image on the page, we should label, in Braille or print (depending on our student's needs), all the objects we use. As the material is presented only with the written concept, it would be

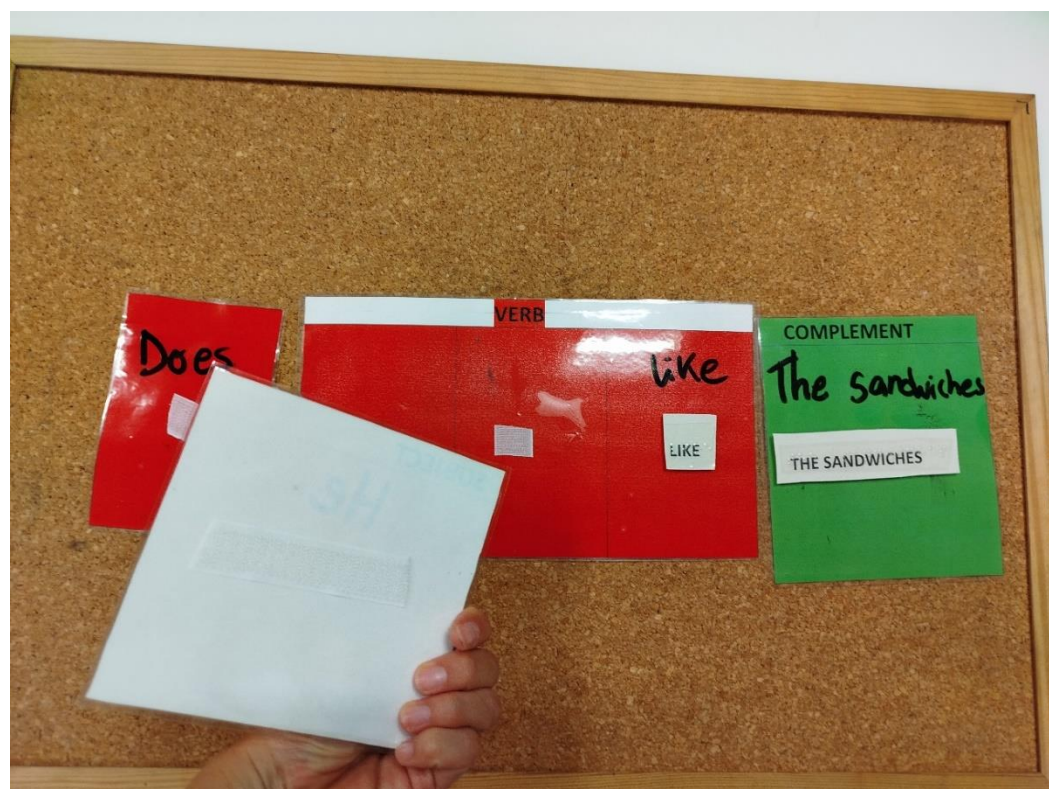
also advisable to try to show the material with their meaning written on it to relate the material and the name.

If the use of realia is not an option and if we were working with low vision students, it would be necessary to enlarge the images and present them one by one (in this case with the written word), so they have time to focus on one at a time.

Explaining **GRAMMAR** in a structuralist way, where the order of the sentence is emphasized or the structure of the tense is explained specifically, is normally achieved using the whiteboard. It is also recommended to use complementary support material such as a 'SENTENCE BUILDER' where students can understand structurally what the teacher is explaining. This resource can be made in different ways. Using materials that students can touch and change the order is always helpful for learning as it makes it more meaningful and multisensory.

### Example of sentence builder:





## Projects

Projects are a good way of making our students work in groups and on collaborative tasks. However, we need to consider how visually impaired students can be included in group projects and how these activities can be adapted so they are accessible.

Projects follow the same rules as the activities mentioned earlier:

- Any images that are central to task, and not simply decorative, should be described in the learner's language. It is important to check whether the explanation supports students' understanding of the aim of the activity.
- When the students are asked to include images, our visually impaired students will probably need help to find them. Furthermore, they can add images or information made by themselves, but the material needs to contain different textures, as well as a brief Braille/print description to enable them to locate the information and images as quickly as possible.
- When the project is done online or created using an app, teachers need to check whether the materials are accessible and allow learners to work autonomously.
- Once the project has been explained and depending on the type of task, our visually impaired students are likely to need extra time to work on them.
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### Example:

1. Create a science showboard to showcase one of the five senses. Include information about the sense and design an experiment to try out the sense.



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## Possible adaptation:

1. Simplify unnecessary text in task instructions to reduce the cognitive load.
2. Check that the image is readable with the learner's digital device.
3. If we are working with a low vision student, enlarging the photo might not be enough if the colour or contrast is not adequate for their visual capacity. We should check whether a text transcription of the whole image is necessary.
4. Adapt the project aim specifically to our learner so they are not disturbed by possible images or information that is not directly related to it.
5. In this specific case, the order of the process can be transcribed as a straightforward list, to make reading and understanding of the objective easier.
6. Give the possibility of including different textures on the showboard, not only to the visually impaired student, but also to the rest of the group so all the projects are accessible.
7. "Step 7" is one of the most complex, so extra time for the preparation and the showcasing will be needed.

8. The teacher should advise the student to use specific webpages or searches for specific resources to support their project preparation. As teachers, we can provide some accessible resources (digital or paper format) from which our students can select the information required. Some examples could be 3D models and posters.

## Digital books and resources

This type of material is sometimes more difficult to adapt as the IT system might not be accessible and compatible with the digital devices our students use.

It is important to check their accessibility so we can change any aspect or even think about the possibility of printing and working on paper if the objective of the activity is not related to digital competence.

## Adaption of tests and official exams

Students who need exam adaptation will need to inform their local examining centre 6 to 8 weeks before the intended exam date detailing:

- The test date you want to register and the test location.
- The type of special arrangements you require.
- Any previous test arrangements.

The application must be supported by medical evidence, no more than 2 years old.

Apart from these administrative requirements, exams adaptations might include:

- Enlargement of the size of the content
- More space to answer the questions
- Extra time
- Use of the learner's computer/digital gadgets to use screen's descriptors
- Adaptation to Braille when necessary

**Sample modified materials for all of Cambridge tests (including IELTS) are available** for some exams in the section 'What modified materials can I have?' in [Cambridge's Special Requirements webpage](#). For details about special arrangements for APTIS exams visit. [Aptis – English language test | British Council](#) For other official exams, visit their official webpage for further details.