Teaching Modern Languages to visually impaired children

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Introduction

'One of the "golden rules" of teaching is that the more senses one engages the better and quicker is the process of learning'. (1987:63)

With this bold statement, Tihomir Nikolic, a blind professor of English in Belgrade, precisely captures the challenge in teaching visually impaired children. Deprived of their sense of vision, these pupils are denied the easiest and most widely-used route to learning, namely using visual stimuli – but may successfully use other senses via teaching methods which might benefit all children.

On reading his statement, it would be tempting to add 'and nowhere more so than in language teaching', which demands skills directly calling on several senses as few other subjects do. I decided to look at these skills particularly as prescribed by the National Curriculum and how they are acquired by visually impaired children in both mainstream and special schools. A wide variety of language teaching methodologies were used by the authors I studied; each seemed to have different merits making choice difficult. Although the current communicative method might be thought particularly accessible to blind and partially sighted children, teaching in the target language was still a debatable issue amongst authors, some of whom could not justify it where the pupils' mother tongue and perception skills lagged behind. As Nikolic (1987:63) points out, this is obviously a wider issue worthy of its own study and not just specific to visually impaired pupils. Whilst considering the historical perspective, I took an integrationist approach and started from the premise that visually impaired pupils in Britain now would necessarily learn by current methodology and would follow the National Curriculum.

Background

The incidence of visual impairment amongst British children is relatively low compared to other types of special need. There are problems in compiling accurate statistics: no form of classification of visually impaired children is completely satisfactory as the influence of an eye condition on actual visual functioning is so difficult to assess. Nor are there easily definable boundaries between partial sight and blindness and the severity of eye conditions may fluctuate over a period of time. Statistics also vary as it is estimated that up to 50% of visually impaired children have additional physical handicaps, emotional or learning difficulties. Figures compiled by the DoE in 1982 suggested the incidence of partial sight amongst schoolchildren to be just over two per 10,000 fully sighted (1989); an RNIB survey of eight LEAs in 1991 recorded the number of visually impaired children as anything between 1.5 and 4.2 per thousand (1991).

Since the Warnock report, there has been a move towards integration of visually impaired and other Special Needs pupils into mainstream education. However, Seamus Hegarty (1993:96–97) claims that because of the small numbers involved, local authority services for these pupils have been very slow to develop. There was a lack of perceived need and so most children were educated in special schools, often fee-paying. By 1985, two-thirds of LEAs had a peripatetic, specialist support service but this included only one or two qualified teachers and very few specifically trained mobility or support staff. Jasmine Dawkins (1991) in conjunction with the RNIB conducted a survey in 1991 into eight LEAs and a number of case studies of individual youngsters. Whilst acknowledging that education in a special school will always be more relevant and feasible for a small number of visually impaired children, she wished to stress the desirability of integrating visually handicapped pupils into the mainstream and selected the subjects of her study accordingly. Although she presents some encouraging models of teamwork which have provided excellent opportunities for these pupils, particularly in secondary schools, it is still striking how varied the evolution of these LEA support services has been around the country and how frequently she discovers that pupils are designated to untrained assistants. Nevertheless, she concludes:

'Children who are of average or above average ability and who have no handicap other than the visual impairment have been found in the the authorities studied to be able to benefit from full integration. Their needs lie quite specifically in the area of access to the curriculum'. (1991:180)

Her brief is not to concentrate on particular subjects and she therefore makes little reference to language teaching but on the National Curriculum as a whole she goes on to say:

'It has been seen that, whether blind or partially sighted, such children can benefit from all areas of the national curriculum. The teaching approaches or the detailed content of some subjects may need to be modified, but no major curriculum area needs to be neglected'. (1991:181)

And focusing particularly on language teaching in a wider, geographical context, Tihomir Nikolic not only shares this non-separatist spirit but actively promotes foreign languages for these children:

'No matter what their educational level, the visually handicapped often display a marked talent for learning foreign languages. This seems to be the result of a particular aural sensitivity and the memory training which forms part of the rehabilitation process. Experience shows that children who have been neglected educationally achieve excellent results in learning foreign languages, especially during the oral stage'. (1986:220)

Gifted linguists?

Whilst communicative teaching methods might appear to be particularly accessible to visually impaired pupils, these methods often rely on visual stimuli. In contrast to all other special needs pupils (and indeed all classroom pupils) visual support in language teaching to pupils with visual impairments is frequently simply not relevant. Does this present an insurmountable problem to language teachers and pupils in special or mainstream schools? J. M. Rhyne writing in 1981 stated emphatically not:

'The visually impaired student who learns a foreign language will require few, if any, special adaptations in the classroom. The audiolingual method now being used by many foreign language programmes is particularly suited to the visually impaired student because of its emphasis on listening and speaking'. (1981:246)

As we shall see below, not all previous or subsequent authors were as optimistic about teaching strategies as Mr Rhyne. However, first, drawing on the scant literature available, I was interested to investigate whether, given any opportunity, visually impaired children had been found to be gifted linguists. Taking into account the historical and cultural perspective (language-teaching methods must be as diverse as are the definitions of a 'good linguist'), there seemed to be a universal concensus that these pupils were adept, at least, at languages. A study made in Liverpool in 1966 and reported in *Teacher of the Blind* marvelled over the success of its pupils in the language laboratories, attributing it to their 'good ear':

'If it is possible to relate success in the language laboratory and success in another subject in the case of blind children, I suspect that the other subject would be music'. (1966:19)

A series of Special Intensive Language Courses for the Blind held in the sixties and evaluated by Ross MacDonald (1966) laid much emphasis on developing stress, intonation and rhythm amongst its students and comprised four-hour intensive language lab, role play, dialogue and other communicative exercises with apparently 'above-average results'. However, motivation amongst the students was perhaps unusually high as they wished to work as translators or language teachers.

Nikolic, whilst remarking on his pupils' 'aural sensitivity' and stating categorically that 'the sense of hearing is the basis for learning a language, while the sight plays a supporting role' is more cautious on an analogy with music, reminding us that 'well-trained ears do not necessarily equate with success in language studies' (1986:223 and 224). Nevertheless, the ability to mimic and recognise aural patterns is a theme taken up time and again by authors. Valerie Price writing only recently urged modern language teachers to

'capitalise on the generally better listening and oral skills of the visually impaired, particularly those who are blind'. (1993:119)

Nikolic also cites a well-trained memory as a meaningful factor in blind children's success in languages. This is echoed by a lecture given by Yearley (1978) at RNIB Worcester College in 1978 who attributes his students' success in learning French to five qualities: an excellent memory, enhanced concentration, a good ear, enthusiasm and lack of self-consciousness.

Given these high expectations, I was interested to observe blind pupils' performance in the languages classroom and spent a day at a special school which takes academically able visually impaired pupils. Comparisons with a mainstream class are perhaps unfair given the special circumstances of these pupils. Nevertheless it is perhaps worth mentioning that I was impressed, not so much by their French and German accents as by their authentic intonation. Languages staff said that their pupils loved imitating and mimicking voices. I also noticed that although they were not exceptionally fluent in speaking, many had a wide range of vocabulary, particularly in a Year 7 French and Year 8 German class. This is all the more impressive considering the problems of access to dictionaries and indices and does suggest that these students have enhanced memory skills. Even amongst the older students, they were certainly not self-conscious although again comparisons with a mainstream class are unfair; the youngsters here enjoy additional study-skills lessons, a very high teacher/pupil ratio and the atmosphere is relaxed and intimate.

If these good listening and speaking abilities of visually impaired children could be thought to be of particular use in language learning, access to the National Curriculum for these pupils might seem relatively easy. However, Dawkins (1991), Corley *et al* (1989) and staff at this special school emphasise the enormous strain intense concentration places on the pupils, regardless of the subject they study. Fatigue, sheer volume of work and the necessity of fitting in an additional curriculum specific to these children (for example, typing or brailling skills and mobility training) take their toll and it is apparently not unusual for Braille users especially to fall asleep in lessons.

Teaching the four skills

'The audio-visual course we have uses filmstrips and flashcards, and a large part of the course is teacher centred. The blackboard and visual materials are used extensively. It is difficult to see how he would function on a par with his peers in this situation or how we could modify the course'. (Corley *et al.*, 1989:19)

These recent comments are quoted as typifying the misgivings of language staff prior to a partially sighted child being considered for transfer to a mainstream comprehensive. A point frequently emphasised by the authors I encountered is that no two visually impaired children have the same needs and where one child may cope simply by sitting next to a sighted friend, provided they are not over-dependent, another may need far more structured support. Just as individuals vary, the differing make-up of a class also influences the way in which pupils learn and teachers teach, even when adopting a communicative approach. In this context, a group of entirely visually impaired pupils might inspire more different teaching and learning strategies than a heterogeneous group of sighted and visually impaired children. Even within a 'special class' such as those I observed at the special school, the students had many varying degrees of impairment which, in educational terms, divided into those who learned by sighted methods and those who used Braille (with some using both). To investigate some of the challenges visually impaired pupils and their teachers face in learning a foreign language, I considered the four Attainment Targets.

Listening and Speaking

Regardless of differing language-teaching ideologies popular at the time, all the authors are unanimous in their emphasis on aural and oral work, particularly with beginners. Yearley (1978) recommends at least one complete term of purely oral work, Nikolic (1987) at least three months.

The teachers who conducted language laboratory experiments at Liverpool's Royal School for the Blind in 1966 hailed the particular advantages of using a *tape recorder* for blind students. Despite reservations that the language lab machinery created a barrier (especially pertinent to blind children who received much individual tuition anyway and risked feeling isolated), they valued especially the opportunity recordings gave for 'active listening' whereby pupils would follow the tape with a Braille transcript. They also used many communicative exercises which would be relevant to any classes today (retelling a story from sound effects, recording role-plays, aural gap-fills) and developed the idea of using *tactile prompts* or 'touch and talk' by describing objects and sometimes using these for storytelling.

Nikolic shares this approach, emphasising in particular the worth of tape-recorders:

'Tape-recorders might be used instead of blackboards in the classroom, thus enabling teachers to review the work done in the lesson, and students to go through the material again'. (1986:229)

However, Corley *et al.* (1989) warn against the dangers of over-using tape-recorders at the expense of learning to read and write/braille fluently; this must be a particular danger for integrated blind or partially sighted children since practising listening and speaking skills is less effort for all concerned than reading and writing. In contrast to Nikolic, these authors and Dawkins (1991) believe that most young visually impaired children, integrated or not, suffer a language lag in their mother tongue because of their problems with perception. Both Corley and Dawkins recommend that, even in a secondary school classroom, these children are seated next to thoughtful and talkative, sighted pupils to help enrich their perception of the visual world. Although developing vocabulary in a new language is a different skill, this strategy would be helpful in language lessons in which communication is paramount. Oral work in groups and role-plays carry special significance for visually impaired pupils, placing them in a situation in which they may be on an equal footing with their sighted peers or may benefit themselves or others from differentiated groupings.

Many of the teaching strategies (such as those in a recent Avon Inset Day 1994) recommended to language teachers of any special needs pupils or indeed all pupils, could be used to effect with blind or partially sighted pupils, such as:

* repetition exercises involving a *physical response* (varying the volume, tone and speed of oral work; oral chains; oral Mexican waves as a way of building up phrases; chanting and singing. Clearly actions prompted by mime or facial expressions would probably not be relevant);

* pre-communicative practice involving *actions* (Simon says; getting up/down .... I watched a Year 6 German group at a special school doing some of these activities, including going to the door and sitting on the floor. They were hesitant but, supervised, gained extra practice in orientation and mobility);

* communicative activities for homework involving *little or no*

writing (finding and listening to foreign radio stations; talking or singing for 10 minutes with an approving signature from parent/guardian; listening again to a tape or recording one's own).

Television brings authentic sounds but also pictures into the classroom. Because of the visual element, this must be a sensitive issue where blind or partially sighted pupils are concerned. In general, language teachers of blind children agree that, like books with pictures, these should not automatically be rejected. In a mainstream classroom, support might again be given by peers or the subject/support teacher.

Visits abroad were highlighted as a priority for special needs pupils in Barbara Lee's study (1992), not only as a means of increasing their confidence in listening and speaking but also as a means of motivation for classroom work. This must be an area in which integration, although laudable in theory, might be difficult to achieve in practice. Worcester College runs a successful exchange with a school for blind children in Marburg but it would be interesting to find out how arrangements might be made for a visually impaired child integrated into a mainstream school.

Reading and writing

I discovered during my visit to a special school just how demanding learning to read and write in a foreign language must be for partially sighted and, even more so, for blind students.

Braille users in any language already face several difficulties, summarised in an article by O'Grady:

> 'Braille takes an exceedingly long time to produce . . . Braille takes up about three time more space than print and is therefore hard to store and transport, and Braille text can deteriorate quite fast'. (1992:31)

One of these difficulties, that of production speed, is being tackled in special schools which are equipped with a CD-Rom to scan texts and convert print to Braille. However, foreign language pupils must in addition master the alphabet of the language being studied. Grade 1 Braille is used for foreign languages and takes up more space than Grade 2. The Braille symbols used for accented letters in French or umlauts in German are represented by singular Braille symbols but these same symbols may be used to represent wholly different letters or letter combinations in other languages. Hyphens and apostrophes in French and capital letters in German nouns can be confusing. Braille may also incorporate the use of contractions to save space as these combine different letters according to the language. However, contractions often take longer for the reader to decipher.

As Nikolic says:

> 'Poor reading speed makes it almost impossible to teach the rhythm and intonation of the foreign language through the textual approach'. (1986:228)

Both Braillers and print users with a visual handicap generally recognise words at a letter level rather than a whole word level because of the difficulties they have with skimming and scanning. A phonological analysis of language is slower than a visual analysis and this has consequences for the reader's language development in terms of spelling, sentence construction and vocabulary. Preparing a text in advance relies on the subject teacher being sufficiently organised to give the pupil plenty of advance warning (Dawson gives successful examples of this working in mainstream schools) and on the child having the time and the energy to do so. It is not hard to see how all of these factors might retard a pupil's acquisition of a foreign language.

Valerie Price (1993) presents some of the problems visually impaired children face in modern language lessons particularly with regard to reading and writing. Modern textbooks aim to be visually appealing to pupils and often present a complicated layout, variable print, text on coloured backgrounds, detailed maps and diagrams, cartoons and photographs not always of the best quality. She recommends obtaining the text on disk from the publishers to start the laborious process of adapting/brailling it. In a later article (1994a) she proposes specific strategies in adapting textbooks for both blind and partially sighted children. Her ideas include:

* *Page layout* – rearrange a fragmented layout e.g., where two lists appear side-by-side which would involve slow scanning for visually impaired children, Braille/large print them one under the other, numbering one list and lettering the other.

* *Variable print* – omit unnecessary information when brailling – although this carries the risk highlighted in Widlake's handbook (1989) of the teacher 'over-editing' material. As with illustrations, a teacher would need to ask him/herself what exactly was being learnt or tested, such as which skills were required for scanning a text or interpreting a picture, and whether short-cuts were preferable for visually impaired pupils. For print-users, the text may need to be enlarged; where cursive script is used it should be typed unless the pupil prefers to use CCTV.

* *Text on coloured backgrounds* – these should be brailled for blind children. Dark and grey backgrounds present problems for large print users as they may not photocopy clearly. The teacher may need to type it out unless the pupil has access to a colour CCTV.

* *Maps and diagrams* – the teacher may need to do some judicial editing and simplify them for partially sighted pupils. As for flashcards, it is possible to produce the information in tactile form. HIMARK pens or thermoformed (heat-sensitive) paper create raised surfaces on paper but, as Valerie Price points out, may be cumbersome. Language staff at the special school I visited had experimented with these but found that pupils did not always respond well to them. Corley *et al.* (1989) comment that using these requires a high teacher:pupil ratio to obtain maximum benefit which, especially in an integrated classroom, may not be feasible.

* *Cartoons and photographs* – again, these may be omitted or simplified. Braille descriptions of cartoon stories may be reinforced by help from a sighted friend or teacher to describe facial expressions etc. Essential information on a photograph could be highlighted for partially sighted pupils.

Home-produced worksheets might follow similar principles to the above, using a clear layout and print/Braille, good photocopies, enhanced outlines and generous spacing between words.Widlake's *Special Children Handbook* (1989) points out that teachers should not automatically assume that partially sighted pupils need an enlarged text, as, depending on their field of vision, they may also require a reduced version. Heavy print if it is double-sided will show through on a CCTV screen.

Modern language *dictionaries* also present a challenge for visually impaired pupils. One small, pocket-sized dictionary transcribes into fifteen hefty volumes of Braille.The language classrooms at the special school had bookshelves stacked, museum-like, with big, heavy manuscripts of Braille. The problem of access is no easier for large print users, considering the tight, economical layout of most dictionaries.

In his report on French teaching at Worcester College, Still comments on the use of vocabularies in text books and of setting pupils homeworks of learning meaningful sentences rather than word lists, since individual vocabulary has 'no permanent form for blind students' (1978:2). The idea of brailling a vocabulary book was rejected, teachers preferring to rely on the pupils' 'powers of memorisation and association' (1978:2).

Elsewhere, Valerie Price outlines the process of converting French and German dictionaries for Braille and large print users (1994b). The format of the dictionaries on which she is currently working is pupil-friendly in that words are arranged side-by-side rather than in columns to make for easy tracking and they include specialist words for visually impaired pupils. They are available on disk too so that additions can be inserted.

Despite these developing resources, using a dictionary must be a laborious process and enlisting the help of a sighted friend or teacher where possible a preferable option. At the special school, volunteer readers are used, particularly for 'A' Level language students. The three students I spoke to used this service but had reservations about its success which depended on the readers either reading out all the possible meanings of the word – a time-consuming process especially in a public exam – or selecting the correct definition which removed any initiative on the part of the student. Rather than representing a skill developed by the student, using a dictionary involved a frustrating degree of dependence on other people for these pupils.

Combining all four skills

Many activities in the modern language classroom inevitably involve more than one Attainment Target. The challenge for visually impaired pupils in combining these was made clear to me during my visit to a special school. Since information which is available to sighted people at a glance is necessarily communicated more slowly to those with visual handicaps, a straightforward activity such as a guided *role-play* involving written responses took on different proportions in the special school classroom. A task involving, for instance, filling in diary details according to your partner's responses ('Was machst du am Montag um zwölf Uhr?') relied on a very time-consuming amount of materials preparation by the teacher. Thus, as this Year 8 group was made up of both blind and partially sighted pupils, the teacher wrote texts for partners A and B in both Braille and bold print. Since a transcription of the chart into Braille would have taken up a good two pages, for the Braille versions he only included details of those days and times with activities. Fortunately, the technology now exists to photocopy Braille. The tasks for most role-play partners were differentiated, with one Braille user and one large print user, a combination I observed later also with Year 10s role-plays. My partner, Alex, used a Brailler and, with no visual clues, was entirely dependent on memory for the questions she asked me. Short of laboriously typing out each answer, she had no means of recording information other than in her mind's eye and subsequently often asked the same questions.

A gap-fill *listening comprehension* was also time-consuming as the loud clatter of the Braillers meant that the tape had to be stopped every time pupils noted down their answer. The writers also were very slow as they had problems in seeing the page. Older students have the added difficulty of reading questions whilst listening to a recording or continually scanning back and forth between a written text and the questions which relate to it – and then writing down their answers. The 'A' Level students spoke of the particular feats of memory involved in doing listening comprehensions for the Oxford and Cambridge syllabus. The extra time they took required a three-hour exam to be extended to five or six hours.

One resource which seems to help especially in all four skills by combining several media is information technology. Developing keyboard skills is judged to be very important to visually impaired children, whose hand to eye coordination is usually affected by visual loss, as it gives them access to multimedia technology. It meets the particular conditions for visually impaired children as perceived by Dawkins:

> 'In making provision to meet communication needs consideration must be given to visual, auditory and tactile media . . . A multi-media approach is certainly likely to be worthwhile in tackling the complex range of activities involved in a school curriculum'. (1991:217)

O'Grady's article describes the use of a CD-Rom combining tactile and audible media to help blind children across the curriculum (1992). The special school has a computer fitted with a voice synthesiser box which recognises English, French and German, with or without the words appearing on the screen. The synthesiser spells out letters in the selected language as they are typed and is also able to read back whole words and sentences. One drawback is that it reads exactly as it spells and will therefore include accents, umlauts and punctuation which makes the reading somewhat stilted! At £400–£500 per synthesiser box, it is also unlikely to be affordable by many LEAs.

Braille users were judged by special school staff to be notoriously bad spellers and this is hardly surprising considering the different alphabets they acquire in their own and foreign languages for writing both in Braille and through keyboards. However, Corley's (1989) concern that IT and CCTV may be isolating for a child integrated into the mainstream classroom may be relieved in a foreign language lesson if the emphasis is laid on group or carousel work.

Conclusion

From my research, it appeared that acquiring one or several modern languages was not only appropriate but desirable for visually impaired pupils. Barbara Lee quotes Montgomery in her report:

> 'It is not necessarily the curriculum but the pedagogy which is the barrier to the participation of children with learning difficulties'.(1990:23)

Lee's report really places the emphasis in teaching languages to pupils with special needs at the heart of a communicative approach and so could be said to exemplify this methodology in its purest form. From within that group of 'special children', those whose main impairment is visual might therefore achieve the most, given the enhanced aural, concentration and memory skills observed by the authors I studied. Whilst claims that all blind children make good linguists must be over-simplified, I found enough evidence in my research to suggest that these pupils should not be discouraged from learning languages, particularly considering the current communicative approach endorsed by the National Curriculum. Nevertheless, whether integrated into the mainstream classroom or placed in a special school, the challenges visually impaired children face in gaining access to the whole languages curriculum have been seen to be considerable. They may require a considerable degree of support in terms both of human resources and learning aids. This brings one to the conclusion reached in Barbara Lee's report, that collaborative teaching in a languages classroom is an ideal to work towards, to benefit special needs and indeed all schoolchildren.

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