

Chapter Eight

Teaching English to Blind Learners

A blind person severely suffers from his/her inability to have direct eye contact with the others. The absence of eye contact causes cognitive, emotional, and social problems to the blind. According to Hall and Hill (1996) blindness refers to the individual's inability to perform any work for which sight is essential. Thus, blind students need to be educated with the use of teaching methods that do not involve sight at all. However, they need learning programs that activate their other working senses such as: listening and hands on activities.

Some educators prefer to use the term visual impairment rather than blindness because some learners may not be completely blind but they are still with special needs. However, in the present chapter I will use the term blind to refer to both: completely blind learners as well as those who suffer from partial visual impairment.

The Characteristics of Blind Learners

Social and Affective Characteristics

Erin and Koenig (1997) explain that blind students are those who use the auditory and tactile modalities as a means of learning new information. Some people think that blind learners are passive, inactive, and more independent students. Nevertheless, blind learners have their own vague world; consequently their behaviors may be misinterpreted by normal people. Blind people live two different types of worlds: (a) the outer world in which they interact with those who can see what they can not; and (b) their inner world of darkness that includes ambiguity which they accept just the way it is.

Zaitoon (2003) believes that blind learners have:

1. Low level of self-confidence;
2. High level of frustration when comparing themselves with the others; and
3. Low level of social adaptation.

El Kourity describes the blind learners as follows:

- 1. Students who usually feel lonely, alien, disappointed, insecure, and anxious;**
- 2. Human beings who feel that they are different from the others; and suffer a lot to be adapted with them; and**
- 3. Citizens who need special care to be socialized since they can not see incidents, behaviors, facial expressions and body language.**

Moreover, blind students find it difficult to move inside the classroom (as well as the school) since blindness affect learners' mobility, spatial coordination, and balance. Such a difficulty may impede the blind learners to interact effectively in school, especially when performing stir activities.

Cognitive and Linguistic Characteristics

El Kourity (1996) assumes that there are no significant cognitive differences between blind and sighted learners. Nevertheless, it has been said that blindness may reduce

learners' academic achievement unless educators make use of methods and techniques of teaching that match with blind learners' characteristics and needs (Erin & Koenig, 1997; Zaitoon, 2003). Actually, blind learners can not draw visual images, consequently teachers (as well as course designers) need to ignore such a skill when dealing with blind learners; and think instead of other activities that can activate the blind learners' working senses, i. e. auditory and tactile modalities.

In addition, Volker (1984) explains that blind people have limited experiences with the environment (compared with the normal) and shortage in recognizing some concepts such as the spatial relationships, and whole/part concepts.

One can not say that blind learners' linguistic ability is lower than the sighted. If we analyze the four major language skills, one can say that their listening skill is supposed to be significantly better than the sighted because they pay greater attention to the source of information in order to overcome the absence of vision. As for reading, they can read using

their ears. In other words, an assisting person can read texts for them and they use their ears instead of their eyes for comprehension.

Regarding speaking, they can be effective and successful speakers once being trained on any oral communication skill such as turn-taking, formal-informal, using formulaic language, or paraphrasing. Concerning writing, we have several examples of distinguished blind people who wrote superior creative literary works such as Taha Hussein and Helen Keller.

Instructing Blind Learners

Blind students need to be offered the same opportunities, like other students, in order to learn and interact in school. All they need is to be encouraged and feel relax. In addition, they require from educators to offer them with suitable learning environment and experiences. According to Walczak (2002), the aim of educating blind students is not only to develop their academic and cognitive

skills, but also to enhance their daily behaviors at home, school, and work.

The literature of instructing younger blind learners (e.g. Bowley & Gardner, 1980; Chen & Dote-Kwan, 1995; McWilliams & Harbin, 1998; Volker, 1984) reveals that they require from the adults around them, whether teachers and/or parents, to:

1. Be friendly with them;
2. Help them feel secure;
3. Be ready to offer them with academic as well as emotional support at any time;
4. Use different ways of demonstrating affection because they can not see facial gestures;
5. Select and make use of effective oral utterances since their experiences are limited because of visual impairment; and
6. Know that ordinary behaviors to the sighted might be considered by the blind learners, not only extraordinary manners but rather, adventures.

Fallen and Umansky (1984) mentions that blind children need to:

1. Learn a much meaningful words as possible;
2. Get some help from the speaker's voice since they can not observe non-verbal gestures; and
3. Know all the incidents that occur around them.

El Kourity (1996) advices teachers of blind learners to do the following:

1. Use real objects in the class;
2. Take the students to field trips;
3. Transform the linguistic concepts into actions and kinesthetic experiences whenever possible; and
4. Think creatively to convey the meaning of abstract concepts.

A Suggested Program for Helping EFL Blind Learners

Under the supervision of the author of the present book, Radwan (2006) conducted a field study that aimed to develop the oral performance of 7 blind fourth-graders who

were studying English as a foreign language. She mainly was looking for improving the sample's attention, repetition, recognition, recall, production, and interaction abilities. The aims of her study were to:

1. Facilitate the process of foreign language learning by blind learners helping them to focus on the meaning rather than rote memorization;
2. Help them to develop their oral performance;
3. Encourage them to feel secure while learning English for the sake of building up a positive attitude towards learning English;
4. Provide them with enjoyable environment of learning; and
5. Teach them some moral values while they learn English.

The proposed program offered by Radwan (2006) depended mainly on:

1. Utilizing Arabic language as a familiar source of prior knowledge to teach English to a sample with limited

experiences because of their sight loss.

2. Making use of hands on activities to compensate for the absent sense.
3. Training the learners on three mnemonic (memory) strategies: utilizing sounds, narrative chain, and rhyming.
4. Activating the auditory modality with interesting input (songs and tales) to attract, and maintain the students' attention.
5. Maintaining a secure classroom environment to relax the students.
6. Composing and making use of songs/chants and stories/tales that are related to the targeted vocabulary found in the students' textbook.
7. Selecting items that match with the students' age, social background, and value and belief system.

In a quasi-experimental study, Radwan (2006) taught her proposed program to the sample of her study. Results revealed that the students' overall oral performance improved

after studying the program. In addition, it was found out that there were significant improvement in the subjects' abilities of paying attention, repetition, recognition, recall, production, and interaction.

Conclusion

Educators are invited to make use of the Grammar-Translation Method when teaching English to blind learners to offer them with cognitive as well as affective familiarity in order to make them feel secure in foreign language classes. Furthermore, course designers and curriculum developers are encouraged to prepare EFL courses to be taught specifically to blind learners rather than just using and/or adapting parts of the regular textbooks offered to the sighted learners of the same age and grade. Such courses should not depend on the visual modality at all; consequently, all the activities and learning practices have be suitable to blind learners.

Moreover, educators need to think of making use of chants, songs, tales, short stories, and plays in order to:

- 1. Create an enjoyable environment in language classroom;**
- 2. Help the students to memorize meaningful words, expressions, and phrases;**
- 3. Overcome blind learners' negative attitudes towards foreign language classes;**
- 4. Offer the students with an interesting input that can help them to keep on paying a reasonable amount of attention for a longer time;**
- 5. Assist them to have better social relationships inside the classroom and the school in general;**
- 6. Teach them moral values in an attractive way, instead of instructing values through commands and demands;**
- 7. Provide them with a pleasing substitute for visual images; i. e., rhythm,**
- 8. Evoke their emotional feelings by leading them to taste the aesthetic language of the literary works; and**
- 9. Change the routine of daily classroom practices.**

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