

Prof. Jadwiga Kuczyńska-Kwapisz Ph.D.
Kornelia Czerwińska M.Phil.
Academy of Special Education
Warsaw

Teaching foreign languages to blind and partially sighted people – concepts versus reality

The results of empirical research indicate that people with visual disabilities have the same dreams and concepts of their education and success as non-disabled people. However, reality modifies these plans in such a way that the blind and visually impaired cannot carry out their plans to achieve a high level of education and to get a rewarding job to a satisfying degree¹. These people enjoy educational and professional successes significantly more seldom than their non-disabled peers.

It is necessary to emphasize that this situation does not result from the lack or limitation of vision itself, which, indeed, makes it difficult to acquire knowledge and practical skills at different stages of education, including higher education, but it definitely does not make it impossible; only the co-occurrence of visual disability and intellectual disability could be a barrier. In order to identify the factors which prevent people with visual impairments from carrying out their educational plans, it is essential to make an interdisciplinary analysis of their situation in the present school system. Such an evaluation should be based on detailed empirical research on, first of all, adaptation of the teaching-learning process to the specific needs and abilities of blind and partially sighted students, including the availability of teaching aids used during classes.

Teaching foreign languages constitutes one of the studied areas as far as education of students with visual disabilities is concerned. According to numerous vision teachers, theoreticians and researchers as well as practitioners, it is a field in which people with visual disabilities can be very successful thanks to their well-trained hearing, memory and great powers of concentration². Not only does the knowledge of foreign languages significantly

¹ R. Ossowski, M. Muszalska, Uwarunkowania aktywności zawodowej osób niewidomych i niedowidzących. Psychologiczna analiza problemu, [in:] A. Brzezińska, Z. Woźniak, K. Maj (ed.), *Osoby z ograniczoną sprawnością na rynku pracy*, Warszawa 2007, p. 162.

² B. Marek, Świat bez wzroku: wyzwania i rozwiązania w nauczaniu języka angielskiego osób niewidomych, [in:] J. Krieger-Knieja, U. Paprocka-Piotrowska (ed.), *Komunikacja językowa w społeczeństwie informacyjnym. Nowe wyzwania dla dydaktyki języków obcych*, Lublin 2006, p. 64-75.

expands opportunities to acquire a broad education, but it also enables a blind or partially sighted person to perform an interesting job of high social prestige. Therefore, it is particularly essential that these people have the same chances to participate in language education as people without visual disabilities.

Language education of people with visual disabilities today – reports on research findings

The present image of language education of people with visual impairments which emerges from the research is not optimistic. The analysis of the data obtained from the studies carried out in special and integrated schools shows numerous gaps both in the preparation of foreign language teachers to work with students with visual disabilities, and in the access to specialist equipment and appropriately adapted teaching aids. The scope of the present paper does not allow for detailed presentation of the research inquiries³, thus the most important results of the diagnostic survey are presented here. The survey included all special school and education centers for the blind and partially sighted (47 teachers of foreign languages were surveyed) and 28 integrated schools (45 teachers were surveyed) which teach students with this type of disability. The questionnaire surveys conducted in both types of schools and the interviews given by the special schools teachers showed, among others:

- lack of or incomplete preparation of the teachers to work with students with visual disabilities: none of the integrated school teachers had a degree in typhlopedagogy, and 25.7% of the special school teachers were incompletely prepared: 20% had a degree only in teaching foreign languages but not in teaching visually impaired students, 5.7% had a degree only in typhlopedagogy but not in language education⁴,
- lack of or limited access to specialist literature on teaching foreign languages to students with visual impairments: 80% of the special school teachers did not know any methodological textbook available on the Polish market, and 77% - any foreign one;

³ More detailed discussion on the research results can be found in a series of articles by K. Czerwińska published in "Szkoła Specjalna" (see bibliography).

⁴ The fact that teachers of foreign languages are not prepared to work with students with special educational needs is discussed by, among others, B. Marek, Świat bez wzroku: wyzwania i rozwiązania w nauczaniu języka angielskiego osób niewidomych, [in:] J. Krieger-Knieja, U. Paprocka-Piotrowska (ed.), Komunikacja językowa w społeczeństwie informacyjnym. Nowe wyzwania dla dydaktyki języków obcych, Lublin 2006, p. 68-69: "In our country, the responsibility for education of children with visual impairments or hearing impairments rests with graduates of special education who, in turn, are not appropriately prepared to teach individual academic subjects, including foreign languages. Thus a young blind prospective specialist in English studies has to choose between an English teacher in a general school who has no preparation in the field of special education and is usually left on his/her own with no support from vision teachers, or a graduate of special education who has a foreign language certificate, often with a high level of competence, who does not guarantee enrollment in a modern languages department."

95.5% of the integrated school teachers could not name any methodological textbook on teaching foreign languages to visually impaired people,

- lack of widely accepted standards for adapting teaching aids to be used with students with visual disabilities, and difficulties in gaining knowledge of adaptation strategies: 55% of the special school teachers and 62.2% of the integrated school teachers declared that they learned the methods to modify teaching aids on their own, drawing mainly on their experiences acquired at work, on their intuition and tips given by their colleagues and students⁵,
- teachers' difficulty in preparing appropriately adapted teaching aids, which in the case of the special school teachers resulted mainly from the lack of financial resources, specialist equipment and time; and in the case of the integrated school teachers – from the lack of specialist equipment and information on adaptation strategies.

Both the teachers of foreign languages working in integrated schools and in special schools indicate unanimously the need for specialist support. According to the surveyed teachers, it is necessary to:

- develop a methodological textbook for teachers of foreign languages who work with students with visual impairments (97.7% - integrated school teachers, 94.3% special school teachers),
- develop and publish foreign language textbooks in alternative formats (95.5% and 97.1% respectively),
- develop practical tips on strategies for adapting typhloglottodidactic aids (97.8% and 79.9% respectively).

While language education of people with visual impairments in the school system can be regarded as full of deficits and unsolved problems, the area of after school activities which help to gain and develop language competence is completely neglected. The questionnaire surveys conducted among 81 randomly selected language schools from all over Poland showed that people with visual disabilities generally do not take part in widely accessible courses: totally blind individuals *rather did not* (38.2%) and *definitely did not* (60.4%) participate in language training; only six schools declared that they had totally blind people among their students, although this was most often occasional enrollment over several years. The situation of partially sighted people looks a little bit better – they took part in the courses

⁵ A detailed analysis of the surveys conducted among the teachers of foreign languages working in special schools showed that quite frequently, the teachers working in the same center used significantly different strategies for adapting typhlodidactic aids, and they did not know the modification methods developed by their colleagues.

organized by 16 schools, however, as in the blind people's case, these were isolated cases. It is necessary to underline that 37.5% of the schools attended by students with visual disabilities conduct their courses using the verbal method which does not require the use of teaching aids that develop reading and writing skills. Language schools are not prepared to enroll blind or partially sighted students:

- according to the majority of headmasters, the teachers are not prepared to work with the blind and partially sighted (*rather not* – 35.8%, *definitely not* – 39.4%, *hard to tell* – 17.2%),
- schools do not have teaching aids accessible to blind students (*rather not* – 23.4%, *definitely not* – 56.8%); eight schools declared that they had appropriate teaching materials and they named here: audio media, headphones, recordings, recorders, tapes, sound materials for use in classroom,
- schools do not have teaching aids accessible to partially sighted students (*rather not* – 24.6%, *definitely not* – 49.3%)⁶.

The research results explicitly show that blind and partially sighted people are discriminated in gaining language competence both in the school system and on the open market of educational services.

Language education of people with visual disabilities tomorrow

The majority of problems, deficits and neglect in the discussed area which were clearly revealed in the outlined research can be soon eliminated thanks to the actions which are currently being undertaken as part of the “Per Linguas Mundi Ad Laborem” project⁷. The solutions suggested by the organizations involved in the project respond directly to the needs presented by the teachers as they contribute considerably to the development and dissemination of knowledge on teaching foreign languages to blind and partially sighted people thanks to, among others:

- development of a methodological textbook for teaching English to students with visual impairments,
- development of standards for adaptation of typhloglottodidactic aids whose effectiveness is now being checked up by 85 blind and partially sighted participants of language courses conducted in Warsaw and Lublin,

⁶ K. Czerwińska, (Nie)Dostępność kursów językowych dla osób niewidomych i słabo widzących, *Wychowanie Na Co Dzień* 2007, no. 4/5, p. 5-6.

⁷ In the project called “Per Linguas Mundi Ad Laborem” (Through Languages of the World to Employment), which is being carried out within the EQUAL Community Initiative funded by the European Social Fund, participate: the Academy of Special Education, the University of Warsaw, the Catholic University of Lublin, the Polish Association of the Blind, and the State Fund for Rehabilitation of Disabled People.

- development of a joint publication on the methods of typhloglottodidactic aids preparation currently used by teachers working in special schools.

The distinct gap in the area of access to appropriately adapted teaching aids, particularly severe for teachers and students of integrated and general education settings and language schools, shall be filled in thanks to the development of resources for teaching the English language, such as: textbooks, workbooks, graphic and multimedia resources, and test formats which were worked out during the project. At present, these resources are being prepared in the university centers for aids adaptation whose specializations are shown in Diagram 1. The English courses which are being conducted as part of the project especially emphasize the use of up-to-date IT-based resources adapted to the visually impaired people's needs, of computers with specialist software in particular.

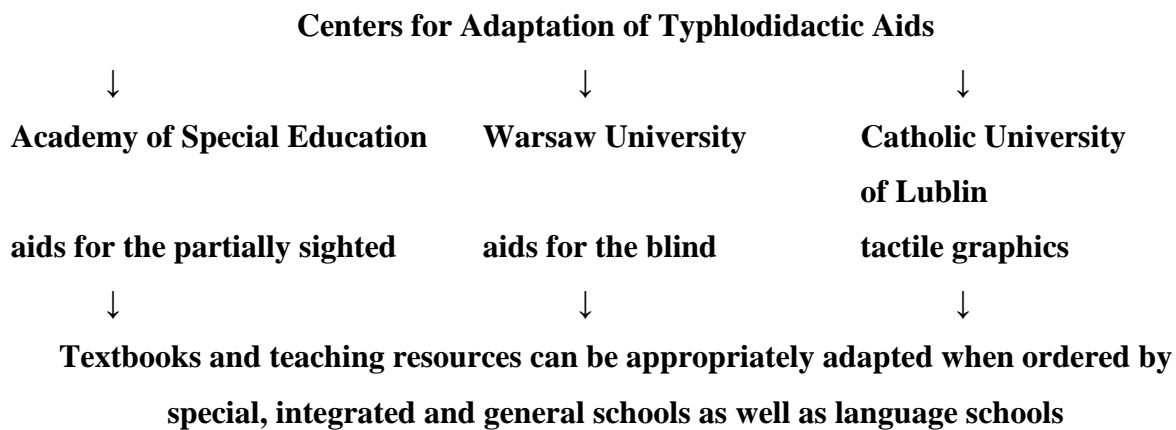
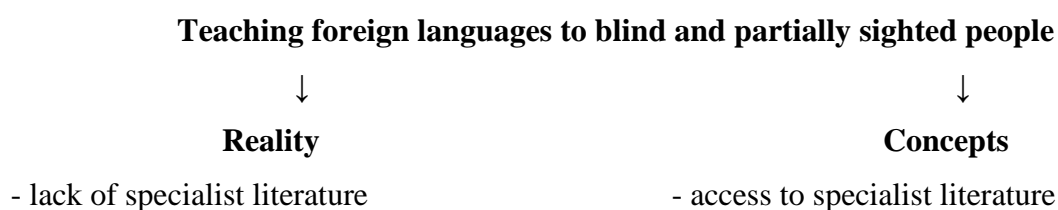


Diagram 1. Model of typhlodidactic aids adaptation developed in the "Per Linguas Mundi Ad Laborem" project (Through Languages of the World to Employment). Source: compiled by author.

The actions undertaken within the "Per Linguas Mundi Ad Laborem" project introduce important changes in the area of typhlodidactics under discussion, and if they are continued, they can contribute to the development of system solutions which would guarantee that people with visual impairments have equal changes in gaining and developing language skills at different stages of their life. Thus the present, rather pessimistic reality will significantly improve.

Instead of conclusion



- lack of adaptive aids
- lack of uniform principles of aids adaptation
- lack of support in adapting textbooks and other resources
- access to adaptive teaching aids
- development of standards for aids adaptation
- chance to modify aids and textbooks in the university centers for adaptation
- use of up-to-date computer aids adapted to the needs of the visually impaired

Diagram 2. Present situation and suggested solutions in the language education system for people with visual disabilities. Source: compiled by author.

References:

1. Czerwińska, K. (2006). Projekt "Per linguas mundi ad laborem" – adaptacja pomocy dydaktycznych do nauczania języków obcych uczniów niewidomych i słabo widzących. („Per Linguas Mundi Ad Laborem” Project – Adapting Teaching Aids for Teaching Foreign Languages to Blind and Partially Sighted Students.) *Szkoła Specjalna*, 4, 243-251.
2. Czerwińska, K. (2007a). Adaptacja pomocy tyfloglottodydaktycznych w szkołach integracyjnych. (Adaptation of Aids for Teaching Foreign Languages to Students with Visual Impairments [Typhloglottodidactic Aids] in Integrated Schools) *Szkoła Specjalna*, 3, 163-174.
3. Czerwińska, K. (2007b). (Nie)Dostępność kursów językowych dla osób niewidomych i słabo widzących. *Wychowanie Na Co Dzień*, 4/5, 3-7.
4. Marek, B. (2006). *Świat bez wzroku: wyzwania i rozwiązania w nauczaniu języka angielskiego osób niewidomych*. In: Krieger-Knieja J., Paprocka-Piotrowska U. (ed.), *Komunikacja językowa w społeczeństwie informacyjnym. Nowe wyzwania dla dydaktyki języków obcych*. Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin, p. 64-75.
5. Ossowski R., Muszalska M. (2007). *Uwarunkowania aktywności zawodowej osób niewidomych i niedowidzących. Psychologiczna analiza problemu*. In: Brzezińska A., Woźniak Z., Maj K. (ed.), *Osoby z ograniczoną sprawnością na rynku pracy*. Wydawnictwo Szkoły Wyższej Psychologii Społecznej „Academica”, Warszawa, p. 149-176.