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Blindness and pragmatic competence in communication

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The paper argues that gaps in knowledge attested in congenitally blind individuals may negatively affect their performance in foreign language tasks testing reading comprehension. Characteristics of a blind learner at various stages of cognitive and educational development are presented, with focus on gaps in knowledge resulting from visual impairment. The concept of pragmatic competence is first explained generally in reference to communication and then it is applied to a case of a comprehension task taken from a secondary school leaving examination exam (Polish "matura", basic level). An analysis of the text indicates that despite being relatively simple in linguistic terms, comprehension tasks may pose a significant processing challenge to blind students due to a large amount of implicitly communicated information dependent on visual experience.

KEY WORDS: blind student, EFL, comprehension, gaps in knowledge, pragmatic competence

Foreword

In this article, we use a descriptive and critical analysis of sources to present the role of pragmatic competence in communicating in mother tongue or foreign language. The competence involves understanding the intention of the author of a message, which is usually beyond the exact wording of the message and closely linked with general knowledge of the world. Understanding the role of pragmatic competence in communication is of vital importance in foreign language teaching to visually disabled persons, especially persons with congenital blindness, whose image of the world may lack knowledge that is acquired through visual stimuli, as numerous papers suggest[1].

We believe that highlighting the pragmatic aspects of verbal communication, and in particular the role of context in the process, is of vital importance for understanding the difficulties that a student, as well as any other blind person, experiences while learning a foreign language. The process of teaching a foreign language in school environment is always based on certain context delivered in texts selected by the authors of student books. For example, written and spoken texts concern school life, free time, environmental protection, celebrities, etc. The authors of student books make sure the texts cover a broad range of topics and are interesting and entertaining, in order to increase the learner's internal motivation to learn the subject. On the one hand, diversified content in foreign language books may be an added value for learners with visual disability, offering them an opportunity to learn more about the world, but on the other hand, we want to emphasise in this article the fact that relying on knowledge of the world associated with visual infor-

[1] B. Marek, *A blind child in an English classroom*. "Network", 1999, no. 2/1, pp. 3–8; A. Marzec, *Multiple Intelligences in Second Language Learning: Evidence from Sighted and Totally Blind Students*. Rozprawa doktorska, KUL Jana Pawła II, Lublin 2017; J. Sak-Wernicka, *The guru effect in blind people's comprehension*, [in:] *Applications of Relevance Theory: From Discourse to Morphemes*, red. A. Piskorska, E. Wałaszewska, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2017, pp. 103–116.

mation in language comprehension tests may negatively affect the performance of blind persons. The example discussed below shows that the problem concerns mainly situations where, based on visual information, a learner must make conclusions concerning the implicit layer of the text, i.e. meaning that is not explicitly expressed.

The consequences of blindness for communication

The dominant role of vision in exploring the physical and natural world as well as social and cultural reality means that congenital eye damage significantly hinders or limits fast and effective performance of numerous activities, especially in such areas as: obtaining information though observation or from written texts and graphics, spatial cognition and independent mobility, and daily routines. The impact of visual disability on various aspects of the ecucation and psychosocial development of an individual depends on a number of personal and environmental factors, while the complexity of influences implies a high heterogeneity of the educational and developmental possibilities and needs in that population. The area where the negative consequences of the dysfunction are clearly visible and particularly important for an individual's learning process is communication, in the broad meaning of the word[2].

Analyses concerning difficulties in communication experienced by congenitally blind persons take into account in particular such aspects as: sensory acquisition of information about items, objects, persons or phenomena as the basis to develop natural concepts, non-verbal messages and their role in understanding the full context of a given situation or using written texts, graphics and films in teaching-learning processes[3].

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[2] R. Walthes, *Einführung in die Blinden- und Sehbehindertenpädagogik*, Reinhardt Verlag, München 2005, p. 52.

[3] Given its purpose and limited volume, the article does not discuss in detail the functions, conditions or possibilities for using texts, graphics and films to teach foreign languages to the blind. It should be noted, however, that although recom-

The inability to visually acquire data about the physical and social environment makes it difficult to mentally construct representative models of the reality. Natural concepts are developed through direct experience of objects and observation of phenomena, activities and processes in various contexts. Thus, mental images of the important properties of an item or phenomenon require an adequate sensory base, which, in the case of blindness, implies the need to develop effective compensatory strategies, based mainly on the sense of touch and hearing[4]. Experiencing objects without the eyes takes time and engages a lot of attention and memory, but at the sime time it is fragmentary and the images based on such experience usually lack certain details, thus being to some extent simplified. It should be noted that deficits in the conceptual resources of blind learners are observed not only in association with objects or phenomena unattainable through the sense of touch due to their strictly visual nature, size, distance or consistency, but are also visible in the case of concepts whose physical designations are available through immediate demonstration[5]. Lack of sensory data, imprecise sensory experiences, inability to comprehend certain important relations between respective elements of the environment – if they are not properly compensated by rehabilitation and school education – may lead to gaps in general knowledge and/or untrue information, which, in turn, will disturb the development of new models and mental representations of the reality in the learning process.

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mendations concerning the standards for developing and/or adapting this type of tools are broadly discussed in national and international publications, their availability to visually disabled persons of various ages in Poland remains insufficient.

[4] K. Jaworska-Biskup, *Dlaczego warto uczyć dzieci niewidome języków obcych? Język obcy jako kompensacyjne narzędzie w procesie poznawania świata i zdobywania wiedzy na temat pojęć*, [in:] *Wyzwania współczesnej pedagogiki specjalnej – praktyka edukacyjna i rewalidacyjna*, ed. T. Żółkowska, B. Ostapiuk, M. Wlazło, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, Szczecin 2010, p. 159.

[5] E. Więckowska, *Edukacja nie wystarczy – potrzeby rewalidacyjne dziecka niewidomego w wieku szkolnym*, [in:] *Uwarunkowania i kierunki rozwoju pedagogiki specjalnej*, ed. B. Antoszewska, Cz. Kosakowski, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń 2011, p. 124.

Gaps in knowledge that negatively affect the effectiveness of the education of blind students, including the acquisition of mother tongue and foreign language skills, are proven both by school practice and academic research. Surveys conducted among 190 educators for the blind in educational institutions specialising in teaching visually disabled children and youth show that the main problems observed in those students includ, among other things: lack or distorted images of the surrounding reality, especially plants, animals, objects, low general knowledge, problems with cause-and-effect thinking and abstract thinking, low level of spatial imagination, etc. Noting learners' problems with acquiring and properly and fully understanding information about the immediate and more distant environments as well as their inability to adequately apply that information in a given situational context, the teachers emphasised the need to introduce new methods and techniques aimed at removing conceptual deficits[6].

Analysis of individual cases concerning the functioning of blind students on English language lessons revealed problems with using concepts that required understanding of the specific properties of visual perception, knowledge of the visual features of objects and phenomena (such as colour, transparency, gloss), using spatial relations and having knowledge of the socially acceptable behaviour in specific situations, e.g. at a medical appointment[7]. Also, gaps in knowledge resulting from the inability to visually observe changes taking place in human body as a result of growing, maturing and

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[6] J. Dłuska, M. Karwowska, W. Karasińska (ed.), *Świat w zasięgu ręki. Dobre praktyki w edukacji uczniów z dysfunkcją wzroku – projekt „Bliżej świata – od konkretu do abstrakcji"*, SOSW nr 1 dla Dzieci i Młodzieży Słabo Widzącej i Niewidomej, Bydgoszcz 2011, pp. 11–13.

[7] A. Piskorska, T. Krzeszowski, B. Marek, *Uczeń z dysfunkcją wzroku na lekcji angielskiego. Wskazówki metodyczne dla nauczycieli*, Uniwersytet Warszawski, Warszawa, 2008, pp. 90–92; K. Jaworska-Biskup, *Dlaczego warto uczyć dzieci niewidome języków obcych? Język obcy jako kompensacyjne narzędzie w procesie poznawania świata i zdobywania wiedzy na temat pojęć*, [in:] *Wyzwania współczesnej pedagogiki specjalnej – praktyka edukacyjna i rewalidacyjna*, ed. T. Żółkowska, B. Ostapiuk, M. Wlazło, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, Szczecin 2010, pp. 160–161.

getting old, and inability to register dynamic activities were reported. Data obtained from case studies should not be overgeneralised, as the level of a blind learner's knowledge depends mainly on the experiences they have had, including whether they have had an opportunity to immediately explore and actively discover and operate in a given space with the assistance of a seeing person (parent, sibling, teacher, educator, guardian, friend), whose verbal commentaries may help understand a given situation correctly and provide information that is completely unavailable in independent exploration due to the child's dysfunction, e.g. inform whether a given phenomenon has any colour or not.

To some extent, the teachers' observations in school conditions correspond to the result of research conducted in a group of 25 blind learners aged between 7 and 12 years attending special schools, which proved that eye damage may be successfully compensated by the other senses in exploring the existing reality, but only on the condition that the scope and type of stimulation provided is optimal and tailored to a child's individual needs. An insufficient or inadequate number of stimuli caused in the subjects egocentrism, knowledge gaps or misunderstanding of concepts. Some learners had such limited knowledge that they could not give any answers. Younger learners tended to be egocentric in language – their associations concerned objects from the area of their interests, well known from everyday life and repetitive, standard activities. In the case of colours, the subjects mentioned their personal property. Unlike the control group, they did not have the ability to specify details of these concept or determine them more precisely, or give less typical examples. There were also questions about the colour of objects or phenomena that do not have this feature. It should be noted that both seeing and blind learners interpreted colour from the perspective of symbolic and emotive meaning, and the lexicon of blind children was particularly elaborate in this respect. Moreover, blind learners could determine a given phenomenon and specify its features, and the analysis proved that they had acquired and assimilated ready-made concepts communicated to them by others. What

was also characteristic of the blind was their ability to think by analogy[8]. A strong interdependence between conceptual resources of young blind learners and their personal everyday experiences, revealed in the research, suggests that the educational process should be very sensitive to individual differences in this group, and in particular to the existing knowledge of learners. It should also be noted that, since blind learners closely associate a given phenomenon, item, visual feature or pattern of behaviour with specific contexts that are familiar to them, they may have problems properly understanding them in different situations. For example, wearing a tight, red dress for a job interview or for a funeral is inappropriate in both cases, however, in order to be able to correctly interpret such behaviour, broader knowledge of the symbolism of colours and their use in various sociocultural contexts is required.

The risk of knowledge gaps was also reported in older blind learners. Research conducted in a group of 53 junior secondary and secondary school students show that their written definitions of selected objects and natural phenomena of differing availability (birch, meadow, wasp, river, rainbow) were more elaborate than in the control group, however, they contained more untrue and scientifically not sound information. Inadequate descriptions of objects were probably due to lack of direct experience and proper representation in the form of spatial models, layouts, or tactile images, and inability to naturally assimilate the acquired information through unrestricted observations of the environment in daily situations[9]. It should be noted, however, that some of the mistakes made by the subjects may suggest misuse of analogies in the teaching-learning process. Sometimes learners associated an object with properties that were characteristic only of another object to which the former was compared. Perhaps, when the common features of both objects

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[8] K. Jaworska-Biskup, *Wpływ rozumienia pojęć przez dzieci niewidome na nauczanie języków obcych*, „Szkoła Specjalna" 2009, no. 1(248), pp. 26–31.

[9] N. Mikołajczak-Matyja, *Wiedza o obiektach i zjawiskach naturalnych w definicjach konstruowanych przez niewidomych i widzących użytkowników języka*, „Szkoła Specjalna" 2006, no. 2, pp. 89–103.

were presented, their differences were not highlighted, which, for a seeing person, may seem evident; for example when comparing the body of the wasp to the bee, with which learners are already familiar, without explaining that the two species live in different places, or comparing the construction of the airplane to the bird, not noting the differences in their respective flying techniques.

The above research confirm the thesis made by numerous authors that[10] the pool of personal experiences of visual disabiled learnes at the beginning of education is poorer in quantity as well as in quality. They also show that the basic goal of rehabilitative education should be to correct misrepresentations, remove cognitive gaps and prevent the development of incorrect concepts. In this respect, compensatory functions may well be performed by language classes, including foreign language classes, in which learners could have a chance to broaden their understanding of concepts in different contexts. Foreign language learning is also associated with acquiring in-depth knowledge of numerous sociocultural standards and development of the ability to behave properly in various situations[11], which in turn may effectively minimise the negative effect of blindness in the non-verbal aspect of communication.

Perception of non-verbal elements of communication by the blind is limited and lack of natural experiences gained through independent observations and direct personal interactions makes it difficult to understand the function and meaning of mimicry, head position and movements, gestures or physical distance. Knowledge of the specificity of nonverbal behaviour, obtained automatically by seeing persons in the course of their development, must be acquired by a blind person in a planned, controlled and systematic way, and much support is needed both in family environment and in rehabili-

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[10] Por. B. Papuda-Dolińska, *Dziecko z niepełnosprawnością wzroku w roli ucznia szkoły ogólnodostępnej, integracyjnej i specjalnej*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2017, pp. 68–78.

[11] A. Olczak, *Język obcy w kształceniu zintegrowanym*, [in:] *Dziedziny kształcenia w klasach I–III*, ed. M. Magda-Adamowicz, L. Kataryńczuk-Mania, Wydawnictwo Akademickie Żak, Warszawa 2013, pp. 41–45.

tation and education. In the process of early development support in blind children, parents and guardians are recommended to introduce play activities presenting certain nonverbal signals typically used in interactions, such as expressing emotions, gesticulating or body and head position in different types of contact. It is noted, however[12], that in the case of certain elements of nonverbal communication (e.g. spatial distance in contacts / situations of different degree of intimacy), it is extremely difficult to convey the necessary information, as this area is interpreted mainly on the basis of visual suggestions and intuition. Lack of vision limits the ability to precisely evaluate spatial relations in social contacts and register changes taking place in the immediate and more distant environments, and consequently, to adapt behaviour to the demands of a given situation. As research results suggest[13], blind persons have problems understanding the full context of a communication situation due to inability to receive or difficulties with unequivocally interpreting the behaviour and body language of interlocutors.

Another area of communication negatively affected by blindness is the delivery of information through teaching aids, whose standards versions are not adapted to the perceptive possibilities of persons with this kind of dysfunction[14]. In the case of language teaching, this issue seems to be particularly important, as lack of adequate adaptations for the blind significantly hinders balanced development of all the linguistic competencies, in particular reading and writing. Technological progress resulting in a broad selection of

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[12] J. Konarska, *Aktywność komunikacyjna dzieci niewidomych jako warunek ich prawidłowego rozwoju i zapobieganie dystansowi społecznemu*, [in:] *Dystans społeczny wobec osób z niepełnosprawnością jako problem pedagogiki specjalnej. Tom I. Przyczyny – Konsekwencje – Przeciwdziałanie*, ed. M. Parchomiuk, B. Szabała, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2012, p. 188.

[13] See E. Śmiechowska-Petrovskij, *Komunikacja niewerbalna w relacji niewidomy-widzący*, [in:] *Współczesni ludzie wobec wyzwań i zagrożeń XXI wieku*, ed. H. Liberska, A. Malina, D. Suwalska-Barancewicz, Difin, Warszawa 2014, pp. 267–269.

[14] For more information, see, for example: K. Czerwińska, *Pomoce dydaktyczne jako istotny element w edukacji uczniów z dysfunkcją wzroku,* „Człowiek – Niepełnosprawność – Społeczeństwo", 2013, no. 4(22), pp. 173–196.

information and communication solutions for the blind and visually impaired helps overcome this kind of barriers. However, when analysing this category of communication problems, two important issues should be noted. First of all, in order to use various teaching aids, a blind learner must first acquire certain skills so as to use specific materials effectively, e.g. they must learn to read tactile graphics, learn Braille reading and writing techniques, learn computer skills for the blind, etc. Secondly, because of unrecognised cognitive gaps in a blind learner caused by lack of early stimulation to compensate for sensory deficits, modern technologies supporting education may prove ineffective. For example, research show[15] that audio description developed in accordance with existing standards for an educational video used in science lessons in secondary schools is incomprehensible for blind learners, because they do not know the objects described in it, such as the bicycle; lack of experience riding the bicycle results in little knowledge of its construction and mechanisms.

Current advancement of education for the blind makes it possible to remove or minimise most of the abovementioned communication difficulties by proper education and rehabilitation measures. Teachers must be particularly sensitive to potential knowledge gaps in blind learners due to their cognitive limitations. Lack of educational reflection in this area may cause failure in completing school tasks and, more broadly, it may lead to developing inadequate models of reality.

Pragmatic competence as a condition for effective communication

Apart from the abovementioned teacher sensitivity to the cognitive specificity of visually disabled learners, it is also important to

[15] S. Cozendey, M. da Piedade Costa, *The audio description as a physics teaching tool*, "Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs" 2016, Vol. 16(1), pp. 1031–1034.

understand the idea of the communication process. Supposedly, the most popular model in our linguistic culture is the code model of language and communication proposed by Roman Jakobson[16]. According to that model, proper understanding of a message depends only on proper decoding, i.e. knowledge of vocabulary, morphology and syntax. The only hindrance to the communication process are obstacles in the communication channel, which, in the case of the blind, are the inability to read black print or not enough time to study a text. If the code model of communication adequately represented the processes taking place in human brain while interpreting statements, then all language exams could be considered as effective tools to measure language skills, because every person on a given level of foreign language knowledge would have equal chances and possibilities to apply their linguistic knowledge and skills to answer comprehension tests, and any differences associated with individual accommodations would be provided for by applying Braille print and prolonging the exam.

However, research in the area of linguistic pragmatics have proven quite long ago that decoding a message, i.e. understanding the meaning of words arranged in a sentence according to syntactic principles, is only the first step towards understanding the meaning of a statement. The author of the implicatum theory, Paule Grice[17] used the following example to illustrate the problem.

A: I am out of petrol.
B: There is a rapetrol station round the corner.

Let us note that it is not the intention of speaker B to inform speaker A about what is located nearby (the literal meaning of the sentence), but rather that it is possible to buy petrol and solve the

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[16] R. Jakobson, *Poetyka w świetle językoznawstwa*, translated by K. Pomorska, „Pamiętnik Literacki: czasopismo kwartalne poświęcone historii i krytyce literatury polskiej", 1960, no. 51/2, pp. 431–473. http://bazhum.muzhp.pl/ [accessed: 10.11.2015].

[17] H.P. Grice, *Logic and conversation*, [in:] *Studies in the way of words*, ed. H.P Grice, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1975/89, pp. 22–40.

problem. It is, according to Grice's terminology, the implicatum of what speaker B says and contextual knowledge, which must imply that the petrol station is open at the time when the conversation takes place – otherwise speaker B's statement would make no sense. Thus, understanding the implicatum requires not only knowledge of the language code but also non-linguistic knowledge in order to interpret the speaker's intention, i.e. pragmatic competence.

Let us modify Grice's original example in the following way:

A: I'm hungry.
B: There is a petrol station round the corner.

Let us note that B's statement may be interpreted as relevant to A's statement only by someone who knows that it is usually possible to buy something to eat at a petrol station. It is not hard to imagine that such knowledge may not be available to a person whose visual disability prevents them from finding out on their own what goods, apart from petrol, are sold at a petrol station. Let us note – which is crucial for the argumentation presented herein – that the knowledge of a blind person concerning the range of products available at a petrol station depends on their personal experience: whether they have accompanyied a driver buying petrol and had the experience of buying food at a petrol station, etc. It could be assumed that such experience is not common. Of course, a person who does not know that food is sold at a petrol station must not necessarily misunderstand B's statement, because they can figure that out, it being the only logical explanation for B's answer to A's statement. Let us note, however, that although a person interpreting the dialogue may come up with such conclusion, it is not the only possible line of understanding. The direction that the recipient's thought will follow depends on many factors, such as the availability of another, alternative interpretation. We can imagine, for example, that if B was a notorious joker, his statement would be interpreted as an absurd suggestion to consume petrol. In a certain situation, such interpretation could more available and more likely for the recipient.

The purpose of the above examples was to illustrate the role of pragmatic competence in communication, and in particular the relationship between the ability to understand the intention of a speaker and knowledge of the world. As contemporary pragmatic theories suggest[18], in line with cognitive psychology research, interpretation of utterances is spontaneous and its objective is to achieve optimum cognitive benefits. In other words, a recipient confronted with an utterance in a given communication situation, does not consciously analyse it, but rather instantly understands it in a way that seems relevant, i.e. provides new information, answers a question, modifies misunderstanding, entertains, etc.

If we agree with the abovementioned authors that the desire to achieve relevant interpretation drives the processing of messages by human brain, it becomes clear why recipients inevitably read the most available interpretations as proper and intended by the speaker. Using the above dialogue, it can be illustrated in the following way: if the presumption that B very likely makes frivolous comments is easily available to the person interpreting B's utterance, whereas the presumption that food is sold at a petrol station is poorly available, the person will spontaneously assume that B is joking and will not search the resources of their memory for alternative interpretations.

The above deliberations suggest that in the process of understanding messages, of crucial importance is instant availability of such contextual presumptions that would lead to relevant and intended interpretation. Considering the fact that most knowledge is acquired through individual interactions with the environment, it can be expected that in the case of the blind, the abovementioned knowledge gaps may negatively affect the understanding of content dependent on knowledge gained through visual interactions – and the majority of interactions are visual. Another issue, already men-

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[18] D. Sperber, D. Wilson. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Blackwell, Oxford 1986/95; D. Wilson, D. Sperber, *Relevance theory*, [in:] *Handbook of Pragmatics,* ed. G. Ward, L. Horn, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 607–632.

tioned in the previous part of the article, should be noted here, namely that in the blind population, availability of knowledge associated with visual experience is highly dependent on the particular situation of an individual, i.e. the kind of general educational support they have received or the events they have participated in, etc. Concerning the petrol station example, it may be assumed that most seeing persons know that petrol stations sell food (e.g. from advertisements near petrol stations), but the same assumption should not be automatically made for the blind.

Let us now relate the above deliberations on pragmatic competence to the English language comprehension test in the secondary school leaving examination of May 2017, basic level. Relevance of the concept of pragmatic competence in understanding a message in the process of foreign language teaching is proven by research conclusions[19], which show that the competence is universal, meaning that it plays the same role in interpreting statements both in the mother tongue and in foreign language. The purpose of discussing the text is to prove that its proper understanding, in order to pass the test, requires, as in every other case, pragmatic competence, which, in this case, is associated with making references to visual elements of knowledge. It should be noted that the test is not unique in terms of using visual elements as the background for interpretation[20]. There are many similar tests in exam papers, and this particular one was selected for analysis, because it was recent:

> Secondary school leaving examination, basic level, 8 May 2017.
> There are three gaps in the text below. Read the text and, in gaps 7.1-7.3, write letters corresponding to the appropriate missing sentence (A to E), so that the text is logical and coherent.

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[19] M. Jodłowiec, *The role of relevance theory in SLA studies*, [in:] *Cognitive Processing in Second Language Acquisition*, ed. M. Putz, L. Sicola, John Benjamins, Amsterdam, 2010, p. 49–66; E. Ifantidou, *Pragmatic competence and explicit instruction*, "Journal of Pragmatics", 2013, nr 59, pp. 93–116.

[20] A. Piskorska, *Blind Learners and Comprehension Tasks*, [in:] *Contemporary English Language Teaching and Research*, ed. M. Marczak, M. Hinton, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2015, pp. 158–174.

Note: You do not need to use two of the sentences.

A CLEVER IDEA

One night four lazy college students were partying till midnight and didn't study for the test which was scheduled for the next day. In the morning, they thought of a perfect plan. 7.1. _____ They told him they had gone out to their friend's wedding the previous night and during their return journey one tyre of their car had burst and they had to push the car all the way back. That was why it was impossible for them to write the test that day. They looked really exhausted.

The professor thought for a while and allowed them to return and take the test after three days.

7.2. _____ They immediately went home to study. On the third day they came again to write the test. The professor explained that all four of them would have to sit in separate classrooms.

They weren't worried because they had worked hard for the previous three days to prepare.

7.3. _____ They could get a maximum score of one hundred points as usual, but there were only two questions. The first one, for which they could get two points, was: What's your name? The second one, worth ninety-eight points, read: Which tyre burst?

adapted from www.quora.com

A. However, the test turned out to be different from what they had expected.
B. Unfortunately, they forgot to meet him on that day.
C. They made themselves look dirty and went to see their professor.
D. That was why he gave them more time to prepare.
E. They promised they would be ready by that time.

The short text contains a number of fragments, including one of the gap-filling possibilities, whose understanding is closely linked with knowledge of how people look or what they see in specific situations. The heroes of the story had partied instead of studying for a test, and so, they decided to lie to their professor. To do that, they "they made themselves look dirty" and told the professor a story that they been at their friend's wedding the day before and on their way back from the wedding, a tyre burst in their car. They

had to push the car all the way back, which is the reason why they could not study for the test. Here comes another visualisation: "They looked really exhausted". The professor agreed to postpone the test for another day, and when that day arrived, he told each of the students to go to a different room and gave them all a test asking "Which tyre broke".

Understanding the text requires drawing conclusions from visual information. First, one must know (this is one of the gaps) that getting dirty was supposed to authenticate the lie of pushing the car. It seems to be an example of the kind of knowledge that is easily available to seeing persons (e.g. from films), but it is hard to judge whether a blind person has had an opportunity to gain it or not. Secondly, the fragment saying that the boys looked tired should be interpreted to mean that in fact, they were tired after the party, but the professor was supposed to think the reason for their tiredness was pushing the car. This fragment may cause quite serious interpretative doubts for a blind person, because the word "really" strengthens the conviction that tiredness was real and in a way undermines the previous line of thought, namely that the boys were all the time pretending. The key to understanding this fragment is the visual argument that a person partying the whole night may look tired, the same as after hard physical labour. Another element of understanding the text also depends on experience that is based on the use of the sense of vision, namely that persons who write an exam in the same room may communicate with each other using some signs, which could help them conceal their lie. Also, interpreting the "exam question" as a proof that the professor did not believe the fake story depends to a crucial degree on visual information: for a seeing person, it is obvious that anyone involved in an event such as a car tyre failure would know which tyre burst, which, however, may not be that obvious for a blind person.

In the light of the above analysis, the question arises as to what kind of skills are tested by the above task, if we assume that communication competences include both knowledge of the language code and pragmatic competence using knowledge of the world in

the process of understanding a message by interpreting the speaker's intentions. It should be noted that in the above exemplary English language test, knowledge based on visual stimuli is not used in order to decode the lexical layer of the test – it would be so, for example, if the text contained colours or adjectives describing aesthetic impressions. Understanding such words is usually not problematic for blind learners, who not only know the definitions of respective concepts, but often supplement them with their own, partly imagined content. In the above examples, reference to visual knowledge is on the level of the background of the text – contextual background that needs to be activated for the text to be a logical and coherent whole. Even though it is not present in the text itself, a learner who has problems understanding the text finds it hard even to explain what it is that they do not understand.

Summary

The article discusses the consequences of general knowledge gaps among the blind, concluding that such gaps may significantly lower the results of foreign language comprehension tests. This is due to the fact that a crucial factor in interpreting certain texts is contextual knowledge obtained by processing visual stimuli that a seeing person encounters either through direct experience or through various visual materials.

Undoubtedly, blind learners reduce, through education, many knowledge deficits resulting from lack of such stimuli. As this article suggests, foreign language lessons are also an opportunity to make up for differences in various images of the world. It is also beyond doubt that pragmatic competence of the blind, understood as the ability to infer communication intentions may be the same as in seeing persons. There are many arguments to prove this, for example the fact that blind persons enroll for foreign language studies and work as translators, which requires a very high level of pragmatic competence.

By these considerations, we only want to claim that it should not be presupposed that a blind learner taking a foreign language exam has relevant knowledge resources and, moreover, can use them in a stressful situation. It should be noted that, although there are many ways to compensate for the lack of direct visual interactions with the environment, not all blind learners have the same opportunities to use them. Apart from the abovementioned development support methods that learners may receive, also the individual history is important, i.e. whether a learner has ever been in a situation that triggered conversation on a given topic. Thus, in visually disabled persons, having specific contextual knowledge depends to a much larger extent on individual factors than in the case of seeing persons.

Although the purpose of this article is to show and discuss the problem rather than suggest specific solutions for educational practice, we may propose that in the case of tests based to a large extent on visual information, blind learners should be given additional explanations. Such solution would help provide equal opportunity to pass tests for all learners.

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