



Teaching a Foreign Language to Partially Sighted and Blind Learners: Overview of Research Findings

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The paper focuses on foreign language typhlology and presents an overview of available research findings in the field, arranged in a chronological order. The studies discussed in the paper pertain either to first language acquisition or foreign language learning by visually impaired learners. The former shed light on the potential problems that visually impaired learners might encounter while learning foreign languages. The problems might emerge both in the phonological or semantic domain. The latter, in turn, discuss such issues as the use of foreign language vocabulary learning strategies and the role of affective factors which facilitate the language learning process. Nowadays the European Union promotes the 'Languages for All' principle, i.e. teaching languages to all groups of learners, regardless of their disabilities and impairments, preferably in an inclusive education setting. Therefore, foreign language teachers should be acquainted with the research findings and their implications presented herein.

KEY WORDS: research on foreign language typhlology, native language acquisition, foreign language learning

1. Introduction

Typhloglottodidactics is a relatively new domain that uses the accomplishments of such sciences as special education, in particular typhlopedagogy, psychology and glottodidactics. The subject matter of typhloglottodidactic studies are the processes of linguistic education of visually impaired students and acquisition of linguistic knowledge and skills by such students. Knowledge of foreign languages forms an indispensable element of education, which facilitates participation in culture and social life. What is more, knowledge of foreign languages performs compensatory functions with respect to the lack of sight or weak sight, in the area of sensory, psychological, communication and creative deprivation, as well as in the area of entertainment (Krzyszowski, 2001: 12). Knowledge of foreign languages, in particular English, increases – in the first place – the chances of visually impaired students for finding employment and allows for greater integration with the environment of fully able people (Aikin-Araluce (2005: 5).

The European Union promotes learning of foreign languages by all students, irrespective of their level of disability, which is reflected in the education policy in such slogans as “Education for All” and “Languages for All.” Numerous EU programmes and projects, such as *Eurochance*, *Listen and Touch*, *Per Linguas Mundi ad Laborem*, *LangSen Project* and *Europejskie Portfolio Językowe dla Niewidomych i Niedowidzących* encourage visually impaired and blind persons to learn foreign languages.

A visually impaired student may be successful in learning a foreign language if he/ she has proper conditions for linguistic development, i.e. if adequate methods of teaching are applied and didactic aids are adjusted to his/ her needs. A foreign language teacher should thus possess at least a basic typhloglottodidactical knowledge, along with knowledge about the first and second language acquisition by visually impaired persons.

In this article, I perform a descriptive and critical analysis of available typhloglottodidactic and typhlolinguisic sources in the area of foreign language teaching in the group of blind and visually impaired students.

2. Beginning of Interest in Foreign Language Teaching

The beginnings of interest in foreign language teaching in the environment of visually impaired and blind people date back to the 1930s. In 1931, a blind teacher, William Patrick Morrissey, issued a book entitled "Teaching Foreign Languages in Schools for the Blind". This was the first publication which drew attention to the potential of blind people as far as foreign language acquisition is concerned. Morrissey claims that loss of sight opens new possibilities before a student, as such student is capable of using his/ her auditory skills in a greater degree than a fully able student. In his publication, Morrissey also noticed that learning a foreign language relies primarily on the sense of hearing, whereas sight, even though useful in learning, is not a determinant of success in foreign language acquisition. It is interesting to note that it was already in the 1930s that a view about the predisposition of blind people for the teaching profession appeared, in particular teachers of foreign languages. In 1934, Flood's publication entitled "The Value of Latin in Schools for the Blind" appeared on the market; it pinpointed the necessity of applying, in schools for the blind, the teaching programme of Latin, commonly used in general schools. It is also worth noting that the 1930s were dominated by the transmissive model of foreign language teaching, based on the grammar and translation method and explicit instruction. Thus, foreign language programmes did not stress the necessity of communication and developing speaking skills, but remembering grammatical forms and developing written translation skills, mainly from the foreign language to the native language, less frequently in a reverse order. Flood's view on the teaching programme was enthusiastically received at the 32nd Convention of the American Association of Instructors of the Blind.

3. Audio-lingual Method in Foreign Language Teaching

In the 1960s, teaching of foreign languages underwent a transformation. Under the impact of behaviourist views, the audio-lingual method developed; its purpose is mastering four linguistic

skills in a sequence from listening and speaking to reading and writing. The core of this method is development of proper linguistic habits, consisting in thoughtless and automatic multiple repeating, remembering and memorising the linguistic material (Komorowska, 2004: 22). The method was used in schools for the blind and at language courses organised for persons with visual impairment. Even though there are no academic publications about the efficiency of this method in schools, yet there is the Dostert Report from the 1960s, which shows significant efficiency of the audio-lingual method in the teaching of foreign languages at language courses. Professor Dostert from Georgetown Research Centre supervised the first initiative undertaken in the USA by the Federal Rehabilitation Agency to prepare visually impaired and blind persons to learn a foreign language and subsequently to gain qualifications to teach it in schools. The programme assumed that the listeners of experimental courses would not only learn foreign languages, but also expand their knowledge about efficient methods and techniques of learning a language by visually impaired and blind persons. The course participants were persons with various visual disabilities who came from several American states. The language course was intense and encompassed forty hours a week. During the course, techniques typical for the audio-lingual method were introduced, such as repeating and memorising dialogues and reacting in a specific manner to the interlocutor's questions. The course took place in a class and in a language laboratory, where the participants could learn independently, by listening to recordings on cassettes and repeating linguistic phrases. During the course, the participants could develop all aspects of the language, but the sequence of mastering them was strictly defined and differed from the modern approach to the foreign language teaching. Before the introduction of vocabulary and grammar of a foreign language, the participants became acquainted with the phonetic system of a language, and were made familiar with such issues as the articulation of individual vowels and consonants and combinations of sounds. As far as linguistic skills are concerned, the course primarily developed the ability to speak and listen with the use of ready-made linguistic

phrases. The ability to write and read were also developed with the use of Braille. In the case of Russian language courses, the participants also had to learn Braille transcription in the Cyrillic (Dostert, 1963; in Jedynek, 2015: 146).

It is worth noting that the American Georgetown project, as the first in the world, drew attention to the new possibilities of offering employment to visually impaired persons. In compliance with the expectations of its authors, the project was successful; after two years, the project participants became qualified to work as interpreters of German and Russian and teachers of these languages. Furthermore, these qualifications translated to actual employment and the majority of language courses participants were hired by general and special education schools (Dostert, 1963 and McDonald, 1968; in Jedynek, 2015: 146).

The initiative undertaken by the American Federal Rehabilitation Agency sparked interest in the teaching of foreign languages in the environment of visually impaired people. The Catholic Guild for the Blind in New York, inspired by the Georgetown project, introduced, at the end of the 1960s, an innovative English teaching programme as a second language for blind immigrants. The programme participants had to declare their desire to reside permanently in the United States and be strongly motivated to master English language quickly. Similarly to the Georgetown programme, the course participants learnt the language via the audio-lingual method. It is worth noting that teaching focused on the practical language, which the immigrants could use in numerous formal and informal situations outside of the language class and which allowed them to function in a new environment on the social and professional level. The teacher provided the participants of the course with a proper prompt in a verbal form (e.g. a template of a sentence, a beginning of a sentence, a word suggesting the content of an utterance) or in the form of a visual material (e.g. an image or a caption adjusted to the needs of visually impaired people) and repeated the prompt a number of times. Subsequently, the participants were asked to repeat the prompt independently, which was accompanied

by reinforcement on the part of the teacher in the form of a praise, which guaranteed feedback. Immigrants participating in the programme not only had to repeat model sentences after the teacher, but also show very good skills of remembering them. It should be noted that the immigrants' native language was not used during classes in order to eliminate any thinking and comparison of structures between the English language and the native language. After mastering, in verbal form, various linguistic structures, the course participants had to learn the material in the area of English Braille, body speech and microexpression applied by seeing people (Jedynak, 2015: 146).

4. Studies on Native Language Acquisition and Implications for Foreign Language Teaching

The 1960s, 1970s and 1980s were the period of very intense studies on the native language acquisition by blind children (e.g. Fraiberg, 1977; Mills, 1983). Scientific publications which appeared at that time allowed not only for understanding the cognitive processes that occur in blind children acquiring their native language, but also processes related to the learning and teaching of foreign languages. For example, Mills (1983, in Jedynak, 2015: 132–133) noted that phonological development in blind children slightly differs from phonological development of fully able children, e.g. children from the first group who do not see the place of articulation of a sound, e.g. /n/, often substitute it with a sound with a completely different place of articulation, whereas fully able children substitute the /n/ sound with another labial sound, e.g. /m/, being influenced by the same place of articulation for both sounds. The observation above may imply certain phonological problems in case of foreign language acquisition by blind children, but not necessarily by adults, who most often have mastered the strategies of learning unknown sounds. Thus, during a foreign language class it is a good idea to devote some more time to practising problematic sounds,

where the place of articulation or the mode of articulation may be particularly difficult to capture by a blind student (Jedynak, 2014).

Results of studies on the understanding of concepts and prototypes in native language also provide teachers with a number of guidelines on how to efficiently teach a foreign language in a group of blind students. Dunlea (1989) claims that innate blindness results in the fact that interpretation of concepts by blind people may differ from their interpretation by fully able people. Dunlea proved that the first group, having limited access to tangible or visual features of objects from the external world, has difficulties with non-abstract concepts and with generalising terms. These observations were confirmed by the results of studies conducted by Jedynak (2011), in which blind adults had problems with exact description of certain concepts, whereas their interpretation of some concepts and phenomena differed slightly from the interpretation of fully able persons (e.g. the *moon* was described by one of the respondents as an object that always has the same round shape, whereas the concept of *battle* does not entail the participation of horses in it). The results above allow for expecting certain problems with understanding terms that may appear during foreign language classes. Therefore, a foreign language teacher should first make sure whether and in which manner a blind student interprets a given term so that there is no negative interference of the meaning from the native language to the foreign language. As far as possible, the teacher should introduce vocabulary in a foreign language with the use of realia (e.g. fruit), spatial models (e.g. a miniature of a moon in different phases) or by combining tactile and auditory techniques (e.g. a model of a dog and recorded sound made by a dog). Certain terms which cannot be experienced by touch or hearing (e.g. colours) should be introduced in a foreign language in the form of linguistic phrases (e.g. green grass, blue sky).

Studies on prototypes also show that blind people assign prototypicality to other concepts than fully able people. 18 blind people and 18 fully able people aged 17–22 took part in Jedynak's study (2008). In the test tasks, the respondents had to provide most proto-

typical associations with words from eight categories (bird, a piece of furniture, fruit, clothing, weather, sport) and put various words in order in eight categories starting from the most prototypical representative of a given category (e.g. in category bird: pigeon, sparrow, swan, duck, magpie). Divergences in assigning prototypicality in the native language by blind persons and by fully able persons implicate certain modifications of the didactic process during the foreign language classes with blind students. Due to the fact that textbooks for foreign languages introduce lexical phenomena on the basis of prototypes characteristic for fully able people, the teacher should enrich the presentation of new material with vocabulary that is prototypical for blind people.

The examination of the process of acquiring the native language by a blind child also inspired Marshall (1968, in Jedynak, 2015: 146-147). The author noted that teachers, similarly to parents teaching a blind child his/ her native language, should adjust the didactic materials to the blind student by preparing real life objects for him/ her (so-called *realia*) through which he/ she can experience learning a foreign language in a context. On the other hand, Nikolic (1987) in his publication entitled "Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Schools for the Blind and Visually Impaired" compares accomplishments in acquisition of a foreign and native language. The author states that visually impaired students may be successful in foreign language acquisition, similarly as in the case of learning their native language. Nikolic draws attention to the fact that students from this group have a particular aptitude to acquire language on account of their auditory sensitivity and exceptionally trained memory. Thus, it may be assumed that the predisposition above helps in mastering the phonetics and phonology of a foreign language and using ready-made linguistic structures. Nikolic also postulates that blind and visually impaired students learn a foreign language together with fully able students, as there are no counter-indications for the first group to be taught according to a different curriculum. As far as materials used by foreign language teachers are concerned, they should be adjusted in a mode that a student

can use remnants of sight or use other senses compensating for loss of sight.

In the 1980s, the audio-lingual method was not longer popular and methodologists started to pay greater attention to the development of writing skills. Therefore, in his publication Nikolic emphasises that the skills of writing and reading in Braille in the native language should be treated as a priority, as they condition later mastering of such skills in Braille in a foreign language. The author also draws attention to the fact that even if fluency in Braille in the native language translates to fluency in a foreign language, yet students may encounter problems with certain dual symbols, i.e. the ones that may have various meanings in the foreign and the native language. Guinan (1997) presents a similar point of view; Guinan critically claims that language classes cannot rely only on the traditional audio-lingual method developing primarily listening and speaking skills, only because of the fact that a student is blind. Guinan concludes that secondary treatment of reading and writing skills in a foreign language results primarily from lack of competence of foreign language teachers, who are usually not familiar with Braille at all or know it in a minimum degree. In consequence, many blind students have problems with correct spelling and writing foreign words, and in particular English words. Guinan postulates that foreign language teachers should be trained in the area of education of visually impaired people.

5. Role of Foreign Languages in the Modern World

The last two decades were a period of many changes in language education inspired by the inclusion policy and equality slogans expressed in initiatives "Education for Everybody" and "Language to Everybody". Many researchers emphasise the essential role of foreign languages in formation of personality and preparation for professional activity (Marek, 2000a, 2000b; Krzeszowski, 2001; Aikin-Araluce, 2005; Czerwińska, 2008; Wyszyńska, 2013).

Visually impaired and blind graduates of language studies are employed as foreign language teachers, interpreters or translators. Learning a foreign language compensates for loss of sight, helping a student to integrate with the society and has positive impact on the student's psychical structure (self-esteem, independence). A visually impaired student with language competence, in particular English, is also more attractive on the European labour market (Jedynak, 2015). McColl (2000) in her publication "Modern Languages for All" also shows benefits resulting from foreign language learning. According to the author, the necessity of communicating with people around the world is a great incentive to learn a foreign language both for fully able persons and persons with disabilities. What is more, the author claims that persons with disabilities may be successful in learning a foreign language if adequate conditions and possibilities are created for them and if they are properly motivated. McColl notices that the efficiency of foreign language learning depends, to a significant degree, on the teachers and the mode in which they bring out the disabled student's potential.

Aikin-Araluce (2005: 81) also draws attention to the teacher's role in foreign language education. In her publication devoted to the teaching of English in Spain, she presents the results of a study which indicate that the success of blind younger children is possible if adequate adaptation of didactic materials, e.g. fiches at language classes introducing new lexical elements, is made by means of applying tactile design. The author also draws attention to the necessity of introducing, by the teachers, of verbal guidelines facilitating location of items in the classroom.

In 2005, a report of the European Commission entitled *Needs of Special Education in Europe. Language Teaching and Learning. Analysis and Innovations* was published. This document summarises years of studies in the area of teaching foreign language among students with various disabilities. The report contains a conclusion about the role of a foreign language in special education: learning a foreign language develops skills that are necessary for living and provides tools supporting personal and social development (Report of the European Commission, 2005: 142).

6. Studies on Improving Efficiency of Foreign Language Teaching

The last two decades were also the period of intense searches for the modes of increasing efficiency of foreign language teaching in the environment of visually impaired students. Wszyńska (2013) in her PhD dissertation notes the necessity of teaching a foreign language with the use of a holistic approach. In a study conducted by her on a group of visually impaired students, the author implemented an experimental method of foreign language teaching called *Psycholinguistic Therapy: Touching the World*, where language competence is developed in parallel with overcoming the student's emotional inhibitions. The method above pertains both to the linguistic and the emotional layer. Language is developed in a two-track mode, i.e. lexicon and grammar are introduced simultaneously via a direct method and with the use of such elements as sand, water and various techniques developing auditory and tactile perception. The method described above also supports emotional development of a student by applying the Brain Linkage Method and elements used in psychotherapy, such as the sand-tray technique or breathing control. The results of Wszyńska's studies indicate high efficiency of the above experimental method of foreign language teaching. The author has observed not only increase in linguistic competence in children with visual impairment, but also improvement of their self-fulfilment and self-esteem. Wszyńska claims that combining language elements with elements of psychotherapy in her experimental method has allowed children to accomplish such good results in foreign language acquisition.

Similarly to Wszyńska, Jedynak (2015), notices the necessity of including elements of psychotherapy in foreign language teaching. The author claims that lack of textbooks for foreign language teaching and didactic materials with large print and written in Braille, as well as inexperienced foreign language teachers affect the emotions of a visually impaired student. What is more, in contrast to fully able students, visually impaired or blind students have a completely

different affective structure, where insecurity and fear may very often be dominant, along with low self-esteem, innate helplessness, low motivation and autonomy or external location of the sense of control. These negative emotional states frequently characterise such students before they even commence foreign language learning and accompany them in all situations not directly related to education. Results of a quantitative and qualitative study (interviews) conducted by the author have allowed for ascertaining that affective factors (low coping competence, low autonomy and external positioning of the sense of control in the case of blind people) cause the fact that students with sight disabilities accomplish low results in learning a foreign language. Such state of affairs happens in spite of so many possibilities offered to them as part of EU programmes and projects and huge potential of blind and visually impaired students to learn foreign languages. Conclusions from the examination of three affective correlates bore fruit in creation of an affective model of teaching a foreign language based on psychotherapy. Its main purpose is to show to foreign language teachers the mode in which they may contribute to the improvement of results in teaching students of this type, apart from cognitive reinforcement of potential of visually impaired and blind people. The model relies on assumptions of affective education, in accordance with which it is first necessary to develop a student's personality (his/ her emotions, stances, system of views) and only later focus on teaching the traditional subjects. The proposed model forms a part of humanistic education and positive psychology. It consists of three stages: 1) evaluation of the emotional state of a student by a foreign language teacher with the use of such tools as consultations with school psychologist, certificates from pedagogical and psychological clinic, medical report, individual educational and therapeutic programmes prepared for the students, observations of other teachers and members of the student's family; 2) preparation by a foreign language teacher of an individual strategic plan focusing on negative affective states hindering efficient foreign language learning; 3) incorporation, into the standard programme of foreign

language teaching, of proper linguistic exercises supplemented with psycho-therapeutic strategies (e.g. techniques of drama and psychodrama which boost self-esteem).

Success in foreign language learning also depends on the ability to adjust the learning strategy, including the vocabulary learning strategy. The concept of a language learning strategy appeared in the 1970s, but was popularised later thanks to the publications of such leading researchers as Rubin (1981), O'Malley et al. (1985), and in particular Oxford (1990). Results of their studies also triggered off studies on strategies in visually impaired people. Wesołowska and Jedynek (2014) decided to examine the impact of loss of sight on the choice of the English language learning strategy by middle school and high school youth on the mid-advanced level (B1, B1+). The comparative analysis of three groups of students (i.e. a group of blind students, a group of visually impaired students and a group of fully able students) showed that these three groups differ in the application of strategies, even though there are groups of strategies applied by all students. The research procedure made use of the retrospective interview technique in the course of which the study participants had to speak about strategies that they applied when learning the following lexical categories: abstract nouns, idioms, preposition phrases and relation of verbs with prepositions. In order to encourage the respondents to describe a situation/ context in which they learnt a given lexical category, elements of an open interview were also applied. The respondents could describe a strategy thanks to which they memorised a given lexical category provided by the researchers, indicate familiarity with a given lexical category or absence of familiarity with a strategy. The respondents' answers were classified as K (known before), 0 (do not remember), I Keyword Strategy, II Imagery Use Strategy, III Representing Sounds in Memory Strategy, IV Employing Action Strategy, V Mental Association Strategy. The study results showed that there were statistically significant differences among groups, namely:

- fully able students applied strategies from group I more often than other groups;

- visually impaired students applied strategies from group III more often than other groups, and;
- blind students applied strategies from group V more often than other groups.

The results above may suggest that foreign language teachers should not only assist blind and visually impaired students in development of keyword strategies, commonly applied by fully able people, but also develop strategies of memorising words through sounds and strategies of memorising through mental association. In this place, it is worth mentioning the LANGLEARN-L project implemented on a platform that allows visually impaired and blind persons, their parents and teachers to exchange experiences and become acquainted with strategies of learning the native language and foreign languages by visually impaired people.

7. Recapitulation

A foreign language teacher who works with a visually impaired or blind student should possess not only substantive knowledge in the area of a foreign language, but also knowledge related to the first language and second language acquisition by visually impaired people. A review of studies presented in this article shows that the teacher should not be limited to applying the audio-lingual method, which primarily develops the listening and speaking skills in a foreign language, but should also develop such skills as reading and writing. The teacher should also develop all aspects of a foreign language, such as grammar, phonetics and vocabulary. There are no counter-indications to introduce vocabulary in a foreign language, even if it refers to concepts experienced via the visual channel. However, it is always worth making sure whether a blind student correctly interprets a given concept in the native language. The teacher should be aware of the role of emotions in the process of language acquisition and of the possibility of combining the didactic process with elements of psychotherapy, which guarantees better accomplishments in foreign language learning.

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