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LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE.

Mobility and daily living skills in an English language classroom.

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Mobility and daily living skills in an English language classroom.

Boguslaw Marek

“‘A Taste of English’, ‘English by Touch’ or ‘What does English Smell Like?’ would have been equally suitable titles for this brief account of the joys and sorrows of having a congenitally blind child among a fully sighted class of young learners of English. For in addition to running her fingers over Braille lines, a blind child will more often than once assist her sense of touch by sniffing, or gently licking an object in order to determine its identity.” (Marek 1999:3)

Although the importance of teaching foreign languages to visually impaired learners is beginning to be recognised in Eastern and Central Europe, there is still a great shortage of materials suitable for learners requiring non-visual methods. This is one of the reasons why mainstream schoolteachers are reluctant to admit visually impaired children in their classrooms. Those who do, are usually left to themselves with the problem of how to include a visually impaired child in language learning activities and how to provide the child (most probably the only Braille user) with suitable adaptations of the course book.

With no legislation supporting *effective* inclusion, with emphasis on theory rather than on practical skills in colleges training specialists in visual impairment, and with no resource centres where potential support teachers could produce tactile graphics and Braille texts, the prospects for a dramatic change in the availability of language teaching materials for visually impaired and totally blind learners are grim but not hopeless. A sensitive and imaginative teacher supported by parents of visually impaired children and a

volunteer or a student trainee willing to work as a classroom assistant, can enrich the syllabus by introducing activities which will involve all of the children and create an effective, friendly environment for acquiring new language in a meaningful context. On the assumption that experience is the key to learning, and that children learn better what they enjoy and find interesting, a syllabus can be developed which will adapt daily living skills and mobility exercises for the purposes of language learning. By providing hands-on experience, such an approach can prove useful and effective as a language teaching strategy which benefits both sighted and visually impaired learners.

Like no other subject, a foreign language course offers endless opportunities for including activities involving daily living skills and mobility, encouraging the children to use all of the available senses. What is more, the ideas for such activities can be drawn from, and applied to all of the subjects in the child's curriculum. Shopping lists and a shopping game can involve literacy as well as mathematics and sorting objects according to shape, size and function; setting the table for a birthday party, or planning seating arrangement provides an opportunity to introduce the children to the concept of maps; preparing a simple meal will engage the children in much loved activities involving both useful everyday language and daily living skills; experiments with planes, levers or magnets from the domain of physics can easily be transformed into entertaining and highly educational activities which introduce the children to a range of 'mysterious' concepts and laws governing the world, and to a lot of meaningful language.

In what follows a range of lexical items related to spatial and visual concepts will be addressed, as well as exercises in mobility and daily living skills, with a view to incorporating them into an English language course. Useful tools for developing entertaining and effective materials for teaching new language or for practising familiar structures and vocabulary will also be described. The exercises and activities to be presented are part of the English language programme for blind and partially sighted children run and supervised by the Department of English Language Teaching (ELT) Typhlology at the Catholic University of Lublin, Poland. Wherever possible, the activities should be linked to drawing. Tactile graphics can be invaluable in facilitating or checking the understanding of spatial relations.

Exercises with a tablemat.

A breakfast or a lunch set placed on a tablemat has for years been used as a successful introduction of totally blind learners to basic spatial relations and tactile graphics at the Laski school for the blind (Poland). The small, easily manageable space contained within the borders of the mat can be used for introducing such concepts as *in the centre*, *on the left*, *on the right*, and *between*. By asking the child to place a cup or a saucer in different parts of the mat, additional concepts can be practised, such as *top*, *bottom*, *top left* etc..

Once the children are familiar with the spatial relations relevant to the activity, they can be encouraged to draw their first tactile “map” of the tablemat. Although sighted peers of visually impaired learners will not, in most cases, need to practise such basic spatial concepts, introducing them through the activities described above and in the context of a foreign language lesson helps avoid the impression that visually impaired children are engaged in an “easy” and “obvious” exercise.

Expanding the space - setting the table

Deciding on the seating arrangement for, say, a birthday party, is a natural extension of the initial exercise in spatial relations. Since it may be impractical to plan this for the entire class, the table can be set for a few dolls and teddy bears. To avoid unnecessary clutter on the (tactile) picture of the tabletop, it is enough to mark the location of plates. Seats can be marked by means of curves as shown in Fig. 1:

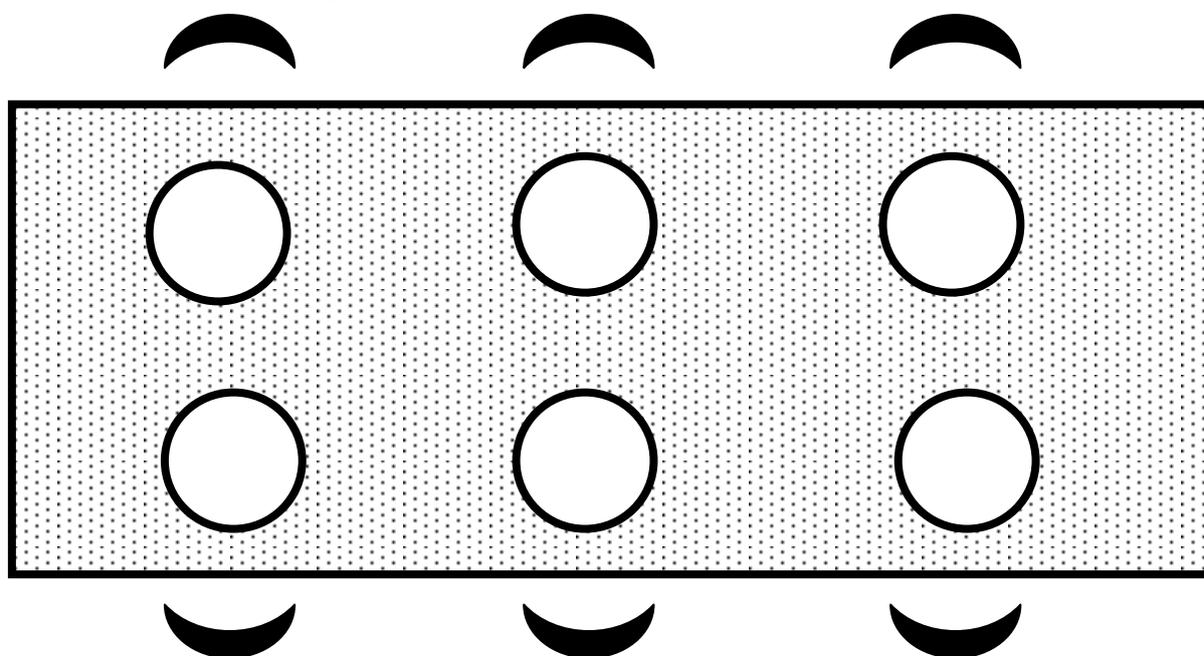


Fig. 1

Concepts such as *in front of*, *between*, *opposite*, *next to*, *on X's right (left)* can be introduced through language activities involving the children in deciding where each of the “guests” is to be seated. Name cards in large print and Braille can be placed on each of the plates to make the most of the activity as an exercise in a foreign language.

Shopping.

Children never get bored with “shopping”. A few apples, some vegetables and tropical fruit, a jar of coffee or honey are always greeted by the children with enthusiasm and joy which compensates for the usual absence of reimbursement. A shopping list made in print and Braille is a good exercise not just in spelling but also in planning a particular activity (for example getting the ingredients for a fruit salad.) A small refrigerator is a great asset to a foreign language classroom. It can help the children learn to classify different food items according to their refrigeration requirements. They can learn which types of food can be stored on one shelf and which items must be separated, which can be frozen and which must be used within a few days of purchasing. English coins used in the shopping games can give them a touch of realism and will engage the children naturally in mathematical calculations which might otherwise be a “boring”, abstract exercise.

Making a salad.

Selecting the ingredients and then chopping, mixing and seasoning the fruit or vegetables used for the salad provides an opportunity to engage the children in an activity they may not have experienced at home. Special care must be taken to ensure safety, but the smile which appears on the blind child’s face with each successful slice of a cucumber and the excitement of the sighted children constitute a satisfactory reward for the effort put into preparing this untypical (for a mainstream school setting) foreign language lesson and for the work which must be put into removing its traces. One thing an observant teacher will notice is the expression of concentration on the face of the blind child, listening for the sound of the (plastic) knife on the chopping board – an indication that another slice has successfully been cut.

Tidying the room.

Ever since a friendly bookshop positively responded to our request for an untypical language teaching tool, such as a vacuum cleaner, the children’s understanding of the layout of the English language classroom has improved. The children compete for a chance to go round the room with this unusual vacuum “hoople” (a mobility aid - an ingenious British invention), learning at the same time some useful skills and acquiring new language. Looking for objects which fell off the table improves search strategies not only of children with a visual impairment but also of sighted children who often ask to be blindfolded in order to prove that they can be just as good as totally blind children in trying to locate lost objects.

Adventure trails

A tactile grid (produced with the help of a Braille typewriter) can make a game board which can be used for a range of activities. Wicky Stix (strings of waxed yarn) can make removable snakes and ladders for the old favourite among children's games. Filling the squares of the grid with Braille and print number stickers is an easy way to turn the board into a simple adventure trail where "lucky" and "unlucky" numbers will give both visually impaired and sighted children a chance to demonstrate various skills and activities (stand on one leg, close your eyes and point to your nose eyes etc..) With access to swell paper, different fragments of the trail can be represented by different lines (solid, dotted or broken) which will prepare the children for their first contact with a real map.

Touch pads

The Concept Keyboard (or its American equivalent - Intellikeys) can be of invaluable help in designing entertaining and highly effective activities for language learning and mobility exercises. Tactile overlays (for "talking" maps, adventure trails, question and answer quizzes) combined with sound effects and verbal instructions or explanations, give the teacher a powerful and inspiring educational tool.

The effort put into "bringing to life" pictures, maps and diagrams (including those made by the children themselves), and the work invested in incorporating mobility and daily living skills into a foreign language course, will soon be rewarded by the progress which the children will make both in their linguistic competence and in the skills required for interpreting spatial relations involved in various activities. Success in these activities gives visually impaired children the confidence that lack of vision need not be an obstacle which cannot be overcome, realising which is an important step towards independence. Last but not least, engaging both sighted and visually impaired children in the same range of activities facilitates mutual understanding and full integration of children who, regardless of whether or not they have a disability, all have "special" needs – a friendly, imaginative learning environment which will activate and develop their intellectual and emotional potential.

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References:

Marek, B. 1999 "A Blind Child in an English Language Classroom." Network. A Journal for English Language Teacher Education. Vol. 2 No. 1 Omnibus & The British Council.