

Beyond the “Handicapped” Label: Narrating Options to Teach Foreign Languages to Blind and Visually Impaired Students

“Discapacitado”: opciones narrativas para enseñar lenguas extranjeras a estudiantes invidentes o de baja visión

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This article describes the research project carried out with a blind student, who studied French at a public university. The pedagogical experience over three years began in a classroom when a foreign language teacher and educator felt herself “handicapped,” as she had not been prepared for working with blind people. In order to put her student on the same level of other students in terms of study possibilities, the teacher entered the blind and visually impaired students’ world through Braille. She designed methodologies in order to encourage the autonomous learning of the foreign language as well as tried to motivate other blind or visually impaired people to acquire the same knowledge.

Key words: Blind, Braille, foreign languages learning, visually impaired

Este artículo describe en un estilo narrativo, el proyecto de investigación realizado con una estudiante invidente, quien estudió francés en una universidad pública. La experiencia pedagógica de tres años empezó en un salón de clase, cuando una profesora y educadora se sintió a sí misma “discapacitada”, ya que no estaba preparada para trabajar con invidentes. Para poner a su estudiante al mismo nivel de los otros estudiantes en términos de posibilidades de estudio, la profesora entró al mundo de los estudiantes invidentes y de baja visión, a través del Braille. Diseñó metodologías para impulsar la autonomía en el aprendizaje de la lengua extranjera, tratando de motivar a otras personas invidentes o de baja visión a adquirir el mismo conocimiento.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras, baja visión, Braille, invidente

Introduction

This article focuses on people with particular physical characteristics, so in general they have been called “handicapped” and have always been present in all levels of educational institutions. Specifically in this article, I describe my work with blind or visually impaired

learners. It’s important to differentiate between the terms “blind” and “visually impaired.” “A person classified as visually impaired is one who has some sight, but requires the care of an eye specialist. A legally blind person is one whose peripheral vision is reduced to 20 percent or less or who can see only the top ‘E’ on the optical examination chart” (De Witt, 1991).

My work with this kind of students has constantly led me to undertake the exploration of the following question: How can blind or visually impaired students study a foreign language without being isolated by the group with whom they study? The “problem” appears when a blind or visually impaired person joins a group of “normal” people. We cannot isolate them, so we have to discover strategies, adapt materials, try methodologies, and analyze options. There are, of course, blind and visually impaired people who have learned a foreign language but, in general, they have not been taught in the same way as other students in their classes.

The following lines will discuss the legal framework in Colombia for the foreign language education of the blind. Then, I will show the steps followed to accomplish the objective of a blind student to learn a foreign language, and those of her teacher to help her to do it. So, I will talk about methodologies which can be applied in university (English, French) and school contexts where blind or visually impaired students learn foreign languages. I will mention how to develop strategies that make blind and visually impaired students better able to study a foreign language, using their individual characteristics. Moreover, I will talk about how I adapted strategies used to teach foreign languages in order to make them functional for my blind student. I will also reference how the autonomy of blind and visually impaired students can be enhanced, thus they become more competitive and independent; not only in their personal life, but also in their future profession or their job.

Other issues I will discuss include how I created and integrated a group of volunteers to read for blind people throughout this process, how I integrated blind and visually impaired students to the “normal” environment in which they have to participate at the university. In addition, you will find information about how important it is to diffuse knowledge of Braille in order to transcribe texts, exams, etc. Finally, I will express how to make students (who are going to be teachers) conscious of the possibility of having blind and visually impaired students in their own classes.

Colombian Legal Framework for Blind and Visually Impaired People’s Foreign Language Learning

According to the OMS, there are thousands of blind and visually impaired people in Colombia and many of them have limited access to education. Specifically, foreign languages are considered difficult and blind and visually impaired people have to learn them using memory, spelling, and oral ability. The Colombian constitution says that “the eradication of

illiteracy and education of people with physical or mental disabilities or exceptional abilities are special obligations of the state” (Colombia, 1991, article 68).

This is a great law written that way, but reality is different, because even if we think all Colombian citizens have the same rights or access to education, blind or visually impaired people do not. Most of them do not have access to a university and those who do have it, do not have the same possibilities for getting a job once they complete their education.

With the INCI (Instituto Nacional para Ciegos [*National Institute for the Blind*]), the Colombian government seeks to promote integration in the classroom of students with visual limitations under the context of equal opportunities for everyone. This proposal has increased teachers’ work because they have to look for more creative resources to develop their job; and among students, because they need to discover a sense of solidarity, class work, and respect for others. These words sound nice but they do not correspond to reality. Most teachers are not prepared for working with blind or visually impaired students. Their academic development is not comparable to that of their classmates’. They are not taught or evaluated the same way as other students are and oftentimes the goals they are expected to reach are limited too.

A New Light on a Teacher’s Road

In the second semester of 2002, a new program, Bachelor of Arts in Spanish and Literature, was begun at the Universidad Industrial de Santander. I taught first semester students the French language course and I learned that one of my students was blind. So, this work begins one day in a classroom without any chance to do research. A common teacher in a common class meets a blind student who wanted to study for a B.A. in Spanish Literature, but discovered she also had to learn French. So, you can imagine the situation: a teacher without any preparation to work with blind or visually impaired people, and a blind student who imagined she was not really going to have to learn French, but just repeat the experience she had had in high school with English: repeating, memorising, and being evaluated in a different way (she never failed, but she did not learn English) because she was considered different.

From the beginning I could see she was really interested in learning. Because of her particular physical characteristics, she did not have any problem listening and speaking, but she did with reading and writing. How to evaluate this student, who was a member of the group, became a challenge since I did not want her to feel she was different academically in terms of the work load and the regular course demands.

The work implicated not only the characters we had mentioned, but also the classmates, the sharing of knowledge (Braille, French), the search for pedagogical strategies, the creation

of special material, adaptation of the existing material, and the change of other teachers’ conception of teaching. So, the problem I mention in this work appears as the need for blind and visually impaired people to be incorporated into society without being treated as deficient, even though their difference from other people is apparent. Another part of the problem is that there is very little material available for teaching a foreign language to blind or visually impaired students. I have met teachers in Argentina who have had successful experiences, but who have not written about the topic.

Blind and visually impaired students often isolate themselves, because they do not want to be discriminated against or be seen as dependent on others. In this work I wanted those students to recognize their situation, take advantage of the other capacities they had with which to integrate the world they lived in, and develop the potential to make them useful citizens. All those aspects are as important as pedagogy, because when a teacher teaches, he or she can influence his or her students’ lives, beliefs, self-confidence, or goals.

The first step I took was to analyze how the student had studied foreign languages at school. At that time, she studied French two hours per week and wrote words letter by letter. Then she had to memorize the words and was evaluated by means of a list of words. She did not think she would ever have to study French again, so she forgot it. In regard to English, she recalled studying English at school and considered English to be easy. Her memory was excellent and the evaluation method used at that time precisely tested her skill to retain words in her memory.

In general, prior to her university education, the complications she faced in learning foreign languages encompassed her teachers’ lack of knowledge and skill to use Braille and her lack of tools such as a computer or a typewriter which forced her to do all her work handwritten. Besides, “blind students and their teachers have to come to terms with time, being aware that they need much more time in anything they do than fully sighted pupils” (Aiazzi, 2008, p. 2). In addition, there was no material available in Braille for her classes, not even a bilingual dictionary, books, or even a watch for blind people. “Books in Braille can be another pressing problem, because they are expensive and difficult to be found” (Aiazzi, 2008, p. 2). Nonetheless, not everything was adverse in her learning process because among her strengths she highlighted her hearing, the attention she paid in the classes, her sense of responsibility, and the fact that she did not want to be considered handicapped.

When she began to study at the university and discovered she had to study French again, she was worried about it because for her, the French language was difficult to learn. In her mind, the process was going to be similar to her previous study of English. When she realized it was going to be different, she was afraid. I explained to her that I was going to work in a personalized way, devoting extra time to her. However, she continued having some limitations with understanding everything we communicated in class. It was evident, for

example, when she realized her classmates had a reaction (for example, laughter) because of mimics I used. I explained to her in Spanish and sometimes I took her hands to imitate the gesture I had made. My student did not have problems with listening and speaking, but she struggled with reading comprehension and writing.

I did not know Braille and I decided to compensate my “handicap” as a teacher by learning Braille with her and I did it in one month. We began to meet for extra work on Saturday mornings. She had only to learn specific French accents for writing. So, I was able to transcribe dialogues, exams, and exercises. She needed to listen to the tape recordings I prepared for her because regular tape recorders were not slow enough for her. She listened to a dialogue with my voice (slower) and then she had to listen to the same dialogue at “normal” speed. Nonetheless, we had to constantly monitor and assess our frequency in using tape recorders because of “the danger of over-using tape-recorders at the expense of learning to read and write/braille fluently” (Couper, 1996, p. 7). It was important for the student to be able to study as her classmates did, and to be integrated to the group, being this one of our objectives.

We realized that my newly gained skill in writing and reading Braille had accelerated the student’s learning process. However, it is relevant to mention that the student had to learn new Braille symbols, because “the Braille symbols used to accent letters in French or umlauts in German are represented by singular Braille symbols but these same symbols may be used to represent wholly different letters or letter combinations in other languages” (Couper, 1998, p. 8). Despite this additional effort to expand her knowledge of this alphabet, her improvement became prominent, considering that she did not have adequate printed material for support; her textbook was the same one that her classmates used. In retrospect, I could see that we achieved substantial progress in the first semester; my student excelled in her grades and became one of the top students in her class.

I looked for information as well as people who had worked with blind and visually impaired students. So, I participated in discussions with teachers and blind people by Internet during the Second Congress of *Interedvisual*, a site that promoted access to communication, education, and culture of blind people. At the same time, I found out the Universidad Industrial de Santander had a group of volunteers who helped students in general. Through the collaboration this group provided, we not only obtained materials for my student, for instance tapes and special paper, but most importantly, a physical space at the library where we had a tape recorder, a table, and some chairs at our disposal. I organized a reading group in order to help my student with the books or articles she was supposed to read just as any of her classmates. This sort of support was of paramount importance since teachers of other subjects asked her to complete the regular oral or written assignments that her classmates had to do.

To read for other people can seem easy, but “reading aloud is a skill. Some people have a natural talent for it, but as with all skills, it needs to be practiced. [...] It is important to only read, but read thoroughly, what the blind individual has asked to be read before the reading has begun. [...] be prepared to describe charts, graphs, pictures, tables or to accentuate any highlighted text” (Lance, 2012, para. 5, 6).

The reading group focused on training volunteers how to read for others, paying attention to intonation, diverse voices, and so on. From twenty students who joined at the beginning, only five of them remained by the end of the workshop. I had anticipated this outcome since usually it might be conflicting and challenging to realize there are other ways of reading, different from what we have learned reading is. For instance, it was important to “read” punctuation, quotations, changes of voices, and so on. At the end, the group members were those students who had stayed and we began to follow a schedule for reading, keeping written records of what page participants read. Unfortunately, this was not the best approach for the student, thus I took the task in my own hands and recorded the most important readings for her at home in my free time. It was difficult but my student’s progress encouraged me in such a way that I did not count time anymore. I also began to help her by typing some of her work since teachers in other subjects considered that she should not be granted any special treatment because of her different physical condition.

I wrote to many people in Latin America and Europe; I knocked on a lot of doors. Another action I took was to establish connections with other scholars working in the field. My objective was to get materials, books, and help in general for my student’s learning process. After being involved in this enterprise for some time, I realized that even if I did not have many answers, it was enough at that time. Among the gains I obtained from this effort, it is worth commenting that, as mentioned earlier, I participated in a virtual discussion group (Interedvisual) and received great help from two people in France, who opened a window to connect me with others.

From this collaboration we were able to obtain several resources: special typewriter (Perkins), a bilingual dictionary French-Spanish (twenty-one books given by Pedro Zurita, a former member of the ONCE, the Spanish blind people’s association), and fifty talking calculators. Our French benefactors sent some short stories and the conjugation of main verbs of French, in Braille. I gave my student a special gift: a talking watch. I did it because she always had to ask the time and I thought it was a way for her to do things as other people did. The calculators were distributed to people I knew would use them in Cali, in Bucaramanga, and in Argentina.

A Small Stone in the Student’s Road

My student continued having difficulties with reading and listening. It was hard for me to understand why if she was good at speaking; she would struggle with other communicative

skills. For the first time in two years she failed an exam. When we analyzed the reasons, we concluded she was not working in French as she did in the other classes because she thought the effort she made was enough for “passing” to the next semester. Besides, she considered it more useful for her to study Spanish, but still, she was conscious that she needed to improve her results in all the courses, otherwise her probabilities of failing were high. She was proud that she had never failed before.

In order to tackle the aforementioned problems, I reshaped some of the methodology I had designed for working with her. I corrected her exams, writing in Braille the correct answers, so she could better appreciate how to correct her mistakes. Without the correction, she could not realize what she had to improve upon. So, it was the same kind of feedback the others students had. Furthermore, she became involved in transcribing extra texts, trying to solve a limitation she still had related to writing and pronunciation: She depended too much on her hearing and did not want to change the way she had worked for a long time, but because of her bad results, she realized that her personal methodology did not work anymore and was a strong obstacle to her progress. She accepted modifying the way she had worked in the past (at school) because she wanted to improve her learning process. By this time, she also became more involved in the use of technology for learning. She became skillful in using JAWS, a software program that allowed her to write, read, and even navigate the Internet. She got a computer as a gift and with her work (she sold beauty products) she was able to pay for Internet access at home.

All those aspects motivated her to study because she was learning different things, she was discovering the Internet world, and she was now able to communicate in a different way. So, with this motivation she studied more than her classmates did. For the oral comprehension work, I gave her some FDLM (*Français dans le monde*, a review in French language) CDs to sensitize her hearing of the French language. She listened to them regularly, but instead of trying to understand in French, she translated everything to Spanish. So, she still had problems with reading and contextual oral comprehension. I realized she worked hard when she was with me, but she did not when she was at home alone. I talked with her and explained how important it was to work autonomously.

In regard to the exams she needed to take in the courses, until fifth semester the procedure was as follows: For writing and reading exams, she used the Perkins machine to answer. As she needed more time (usually twice as much as her peers), she finished the exams in the teachers’ office. The exams were completely transcribed to Braille. For speaking, I recorded her answers, so we could better detect what to correct. Then, she had to listen to herself in order to be more conscious of mistakes and correct them. For listening, at the beginning she had to answer as did the other students. It means, to listen to a text and then to choose or complete answers. As her classmates, she listened and tried to read the options at

the same time. But for her it was more difficult, so I decided she should take that exam alone. In that way, she listened to the texts, then I read the possible answers or what she had to complete, and she gave me oral answers. In this way, she improved that part of the exam. It is relevant to mention that after the exams, I always gave feedback in class for the whole group, in general, using the board; but with this student, there was a need for external work, because I used to rewrite her mistakes on the exam and their correction in Braille.

Generally, students who learnt English at the university attended the Foreign Languages Institute; however, since this student and her classmates studied a different foreign language, they were exempted. Later, she wanted to study English and, thanks to the sensibility and generosity of the Institute’s director, there was an English book in Braille for her. Unfortunately my effort to obtain a French textbook would not prosper due to the excessive cost of these materials. So, I continued transcribing the material for the learning of French to Braille. In that way, my student could be sure she had the essential material for studying. However, she was not working as she needed to, so she was not improving her French level. As anybody else, she had to study if she wanted to learn, so, I explained to her that she had to understand she was like everybody else in terms of studying, preparing, and reviewing.

The student realized she was losing what she had accomplished in the French language class, so, she set her mind to achieving her goals and recovering her original impetus, studying hard. She obtained substantial results in all the courses, and after five years, she got her Bachelor of Arts degree having never failed a course. At the beginning she could not find a job as a teacher, because people at different schools thought she was not going to be able to work with sighted students. She realized everybody continued seeing her as a “handicapped” person. So she worked with blind or visually impaired children in the same institution where she had studied when she was a little girl. Then she was offered a job in a public school in Cimitarra (Santander), but she declined it and accepted working with blind and visually impaired children in an ONG. For her, Cimitarra was too far and she decided to wait for a better job opportunity. Nevertheless, after declining the offer, she realized it had been a bad decision, because even if the work with the ONG was something she liked, it was not exactly a job.

Conclusions

As a foreign languages teacher and as a future teachers’ trainer, I wanted to share how my experience with blind and impaired visual students began. This article focuses on people with particular physical characteristics who, in general, have been called “handicapped” and have always been present in all levels of educational institutions.

My students had to face many limitations to learn foreign languages, but also possessed important strengths. On the one hand, there were the facts that the teachers in general were not prepared to work with students with her physical situation, the need she had to be

integrated in society as everybody, and the little material in existence for working with blind and visually impaired people. On the other hand, there were the interest a teacher had in her, the great memory she had, and her hearing and sense of responsibility.

The methodology I used as a teacher to adapt material, the help we had from other countries and the personal motivation of my student were determinant factors for my student to achieve her goals. The main objective I have with this work is to help people overcome prejudices and to open doors for blind and visually impaired people in order to motivate them to begin the same adventure my student began when she decided to face the challenge of studying at a university. It is important to mention that she was part of a group of forty students; just five of them finished the program without failing any courses. She was one of them.

Her dream goes further than proving to herself and to others that she is blind but not handicapped; that she is different, but that she can be as competitive as any other person. She sees herself as a Spanish, literature and French language teacher, with blind or seeing, tall or short, black or white students, because the differences enrich the pedagogical experience. The diversity that she lived as a real witness is going to make her a better teacher in the future.

The experience I have described above reassures one that individual students' characteristics need to be taken into consideration in their learning process; "It's essential to consider each student like a unique person" (De Vecchi & Carmona-Magnaldi, 1996, p. 226). For the student, to build knowledge is to be conscious that he or she is the only one who can do it. Whatever kind of students they may be, it's essential that they have the will to learn, because without it, they will fail. "The best way to help them was to stimulate them [...] to find answers and solutions by themselves, that is, to become more responsible of their learning process" (Aiazzi, 2008, p. 3).

My student felt she was responsible for her own learning process and it was because of that that she could succeed. She realized she needed help to learn, but it was obvious nobody could learn for her. Besides, blind and visually impaired people need to be more encouraged, because they do not feel as confident as others, so "they ask continually the teachers' attention on them and need to be constantly reassured on what they have to do" (Aiazzi, 2008, p. 3). It does not mean we have to exaggerate or lie, but to pay more attention to this group of people who, even nowadays, are not completely integrated in society.

Moreover, it is important that the teacher adapt to his or her students. When I met my blind student I realized from the first day that I had to think more about material, strategies, and examples in order to be understood and in order to help her to learn. When it is not possible for a teacher to adapt all those things, he or she must at least think about new strategies or must receive help from experts or specialists, depending on the kind of students he or she has. The ability to adapt himself or herself to the students' differences can be

considered a logical component of teachers’ work, but in terms of reality, we can still find teachers who do not pay attention to students’ characteristics, even when they are quite evident.

In general, all of us would like to see our societies thriving to provide equal opportunities for access to education. Nevertheless, that condition does not exist in the case we expose here. One of the reasons is the lack of books for students, because of the high cost of materials for blind and visually impaired people. Some universities in Colombia have the software JAWS (reads information using synthesized voice), or special printers, or material in Braille for the blind and visually impaired students; it should be the same in all the universities and schools in the country but it is not. So, it shows how limited access to education is for blind and visually impaired people.

The second one is the fact the teachers do not have the training for working with blind and visually impaired students, and do not want to learn or to search for how to do it. Another reason is the limited access blind and visually impaired people have for studying at the university, because of the limited collaboration of the concerned institutions. Besides, even if a blind or visually impaired person has studied and has a professional degree, he or she does not find a job, because people consider them “handicapped” and incapable of working as other people.

A blind person, who achieves foreign language learning will not only be a model to follow, but also an eventual teacher of that language and this will motivate other blind people to acquire the same knowledge. I have continued this project and I have to explain that the final purpose was not only for my student to learn French. It was one of the purposes, but the work made the consideration of other projects possible. The second part of the project will show how she was able to teach French to other blind or visually impaired people. I will share with you how university students have worked as teachers and tutors of this group of people by teaching English and French.

Besides, it is important to think about the fact that a blind or visually impaired person should learn not only one, but several foreign languages, because his or her physical condition enables other skills that improve a foreign language acquisition (memory, ear, attention). “Those whose main impairment is visual must therefore achieve the most, given the enhanced aural, concentration and memory skills...” (Couper, 1996, p. 9). “Visually impaired students generally show a greater mastery of the skill for listening and writing in English” (Santana, 2003, p. 16).

A student with an “evident physical difference” must be treated as the others are. “The ‘innate’ egocentrism and uncertainty about the outer reality blind people can have often affect classroom activities” (Aiazzi, 2008, p. 3). So, he or she will be conscious of his or her abilities and will also learn to overcome the difficulties he or she has. This will motivate them to study,

because they will see that, even if they are not like the others, they are not the only ones with this condition. They will learn that the world is not going to change for them. It is the student who must change the world, to improve it, to get a place in it, and above all, to have a successful learning experience. In this work, we can see that the blind student wanted to be treated as everybody, but she had to realize that it included the fact she had to study, as everybody, if she wanted to succeed.

Why are blind and/or visually impaired people discriminated against and considered handicapped when that term can correspond to the teachers or classmates who work by their side? Have we considered the abilities which blind or visually impaired people have (and that other people do not)?

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