

# Teaching English Language to Visually Impaired Children

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## Abstract

Language is one of the most precious gifts. Language shapes our mental and emotional make up, our personality and our psyche. English is an important international language. It has been given the status of a 'library language'. This has become absolutely essential as knowledge has been exploding, developing, expanding at a breathtaking pace. Teachers generally rely on printed materials to teach vocabulary and grammar to sighted students. They may find it challenging to teach English to visually impaired children. Since it is possible to learn a language by listening and speaking, there are still plenty of activities that can help visually impaired children to learn English. So this paper suggests some strategies and methods for teaching English language to visually impaired children.

**Keywords:** English language, visually impaired, disabilities.

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## Introduction

Each individual is a lonely human being. It is language that bridges the gulf between two or more than two isolated human beings. It is through language that a man communicates, shares his thoughts, feelings and experiences with other members. English is an important international language. It has been given the status of a library language. The teaching and learning of English should be an enjoyable and exciting adventure. It is widely recognised that English has become the language of globalisation, international business, politics, diplomacy, science, computers, internet and entertainment. As such an important area that has to be dealt with to achieve the abilities society demands now-a-days. So English must be taught to all students, including students with disabilities. Individuals with visual impairments should take advantage of learning English because it would help them to have more chances as well as enriching their integration into society.

## Language challenges of Visually Impaired Students

The four skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing are very important in English language. These are always connected in terms of usage. Every skill has its own importance in most of the cases. None can be developed without the other. Before speaking it is necessary to develop listening skills first and reading cannot be done if writing is unknown.

It is also important to take into account pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and spelling. So, it is necessary to give needed attention to each skill when required. The required attention may vary depending on the kind of learners. The major challenge that visually impaired students face is in learning the four language skills - listening, speaking, reading and writing.

### Listening skill

Listening skills are very important to learn English language. Now-a-days there are many external inputs such as internet, music, television etc. where English is available to all people around the world. Listening is the primary learning method for blind students and a strong helpful tool for visually impaired students, because from infancy these children learn through sounds and tactile experiences. Therefore children who are visually impaired need good activities in order to be motivated in learning English language.

Catchy activities which are specially prepared for them can motivate children. They will feel the enthusiasm of following the activities. It is necessary to take into account some measures such as reducing distractions in the environment, to repeat a topic when necessary and using a language according to the child context.

### Speaking Skill

Speaking can be defined as meaningful voice patterns produced through regular processing of speech organs. It is one of the productive skills at the time of communication.

In order to acquire difficult speech sounds and grammar rules, it is crucial to develop the listening skills. Children learn this speaking skills first by listening to their families and then by following the steps of uttering and imitation. In relation to visually impaired children, speaking might be more complex due to their difficulty to see how the lips pronounce the words. It is good initiative to name the toys they play with and the similarities they could have with other things. By this they can learn to relate concepts more easily. It is indispensable to encourage the children to produce speaking in the earlier stages of the learning process for the proper development of speaking skill. During this period when the teachers have to speak a lot in

English language, it will demonstrate to students that speaking is not as difficult as it looks like. The more practice in the language, the more improvement children will have in their speaking skills.

## Reading Skill

Reading can be defined as "recognition, interpretation and assimilation of the ideas represented by symbolic material, whether it is displayed visually, tactilely or aurally". It is one of the four skills which facilitate children to acquire English language.

There are a great variety of written texts such as articles, poems, stories, announcements, letters, labels, cartoon etc. are available everywhere. For little children, some short stories can be introduced at an earlier stage. It is important to pay special attention to letter recognition and phonetics.

Visually impaired students are needed to learn reading in order to improve their knowledge of writing and to reflect their knowledge. But reading and writing skills are must often skills that involve visual abilities to acquire them. So students with visual impairments may face many challenges in acquiring these skills. They may face difficulties in organizing ideas and sentence structures.

Visually impaired children need a special attention to develop reading skill. The letters in texts should be printed in larger size or in Braille depending on the degree of their impairment. It is necessary to prepare material consistent with their knowledge while reading, it is significant to let students know why a specific topic was chosen and be focused not only in the reading itself but also in doing complementary activities before and after the reading. Prediction activity can increase children's motivation towards the topic skimming and scanning activities that can be adjusted taking into consideration children's abilities to read and analyze texts. Reading aloud is useful to visually impaired children as it improves their pronunciation of words.

## Writing Skill

Writing skill plays a vital role in achieving personal and career goals. It has to be developed when children get into school and should be taught along with reading. This skill deals with the expression of one's thoughts, presenting ideas and other people's point of view. Visually impaired children cannot write as others do. They have to learn the Braille system. This system is quite difficult to learn because it depends only on the tactile abilities. Children with vision problems have to recognize dots and shapes. And it also depends on children's enthusiasm with learning. Braille system has to be printed in special machines. So it is complicated to have this system in all schools and the reason why not all visually impaired children know how to read with this method.

## Strategies and Methods in teaching English to Visually Impaired Children

To succeed in English language teaching, teachers should promote Gardner's Multiple Intelligence theory because it proposes a multi-sensory aspect of learning. So teachers must incorporate experiences with other senses of visually impaired children. These children benefit from participating in games that combine words with activities as they enable them to learn by associating language with body movement experience. It is necessary to adopt the classroom to facilitate students physical adaptations. Some of the strategies that are to be followed are

- Whenever a teacher leaves or enters the classroom, it is necessary to speak to the class notifying these visually impaired students that the teacher is in proximity.
- While using the board or any other teaching materials like posters or charts, it is fundamental to use dark markers.
- Teachers must give emphasis to auditory experiences.
- Providing tactile experiences (i.e. while teaching about flowers, bringing them to class).
- Enhancing common listening and speaking activities. Talking to students through comprehension and grammar questions related to listening exercises.
- For developing speaking skill, bring realia, raised line drawing or tactile pictures and ask the students to tell about that object or image. Role plays and timed speaking are good examples.
- Recording each lesson on tape, so that the student can listen at home.
- Teaching grammar through touch and movement. Make cuisenaire rods tactile by giving on textured material such as nubby fabric, rubber or sandpaper. Choose a texture for each colour. Use each texture to represent a part of speech and build sentences with the rods.
- Language abilities / skills are developed by constant and consistent practice. A student will acquire these abilities if he / she himself / herself is given ample opportunities to practice and not just by reading a book or listening to lectures.
- Grammar translation method is not suitable to this children because it helps the child only to talk about the language but not to use the language.
- While teaching the prose text, emphasis should be on the development of inferential and evaluative comprehension.
- Situational teaching is advocated as it is the natural method by which a child acquires his mother tongue he picks up words, phrases and sentences in meaningful situations. Micheal Halliday describes language as "contextualised noise". It is the context which lends meaning to words. For the visually impaired children, we can make use of the different kinds of situations. For teaching the present continuous tense teacher asks a student to knock the door. Teacher explains to the class that "This boy is knocking on the door".

In order to teach adjectives, teacher gives a piece of a rough blanket to pupil and asks him to touch it. The teacher explains that the cloth is rough.

- Every new structure and every new word should be written out in Braille and read aloud.

The teaching and learning of English should be programmed as a Learner Centered Education. It is the learner who should be able to communicate in English. To ensure effective communication, variety of activities should be made use of like role-playing, simulating, real-to-life situations, using newspaper clippings, borrowing situations from the world around him/her, from books and from other disciplines, interpreting pictures, narrating stories and using media inputs.

## Conclusion

In the past visually impaired children used to be integrated in special schools. At present, there is a movement of inclusive education which is the right of students with disability to participate in schools as non-impaired students. So schools should adapt their curriculum and teaching pedagogy to the needs of the visually impaired students. The teacher should play the role of the facilitator of learning. He/she should present language items, contrive situations which should enable the learner to use English for purposes of communication and expression. Oral - Aural teaching and testing should be made an integral part of the learning process. Evaluation should not be an end-of-the-session phenomenon. It should be continuous and comprehensive. An effort should be made to develop the cognitive and affective faculties of the learner and to make the acquisition of language abilities a joy, a simulating experience and an exciting adventure. However the most important is to always maintain high expectations. Teachers should have the same academic and behavioral expectations for them as for their sighted students.

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