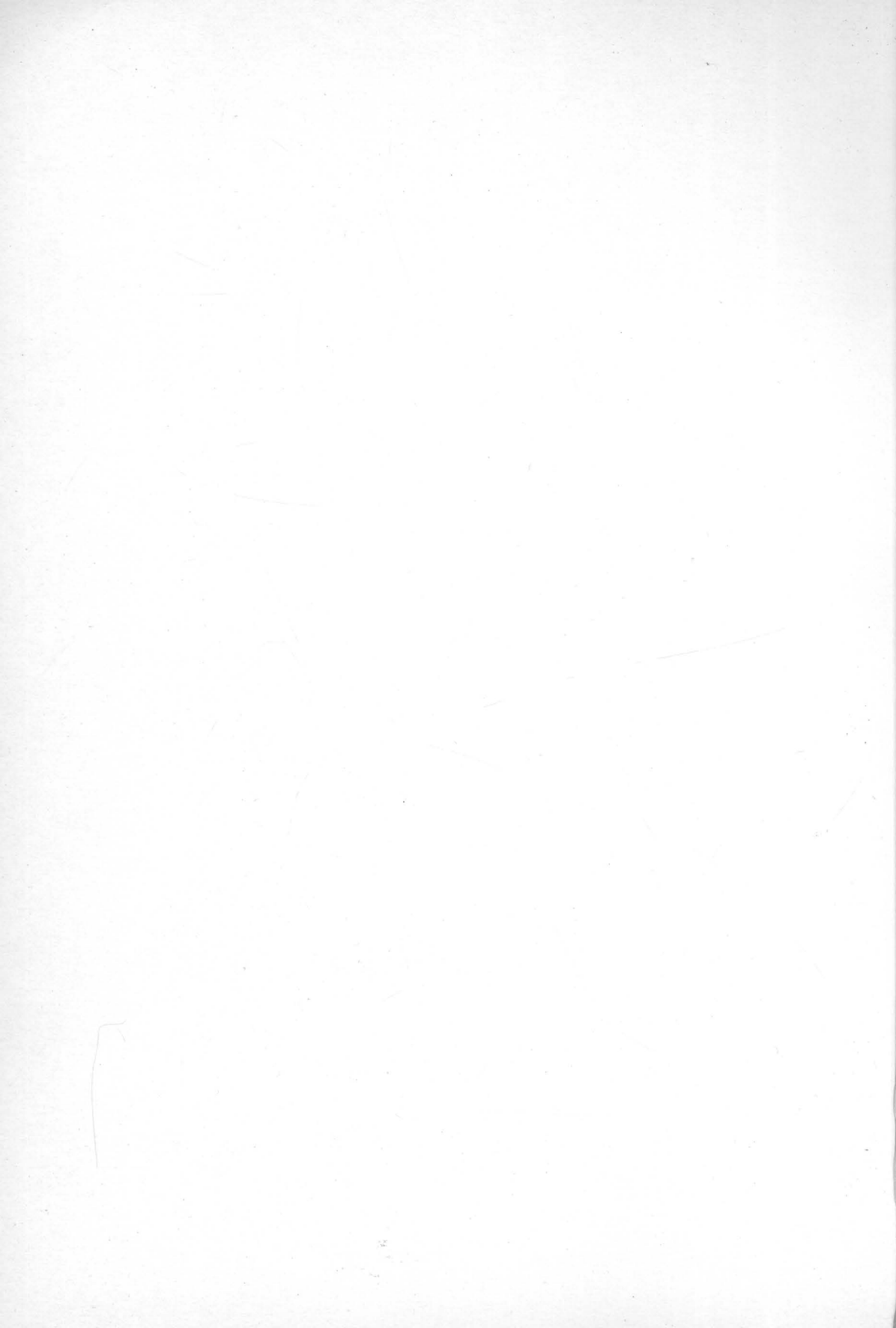


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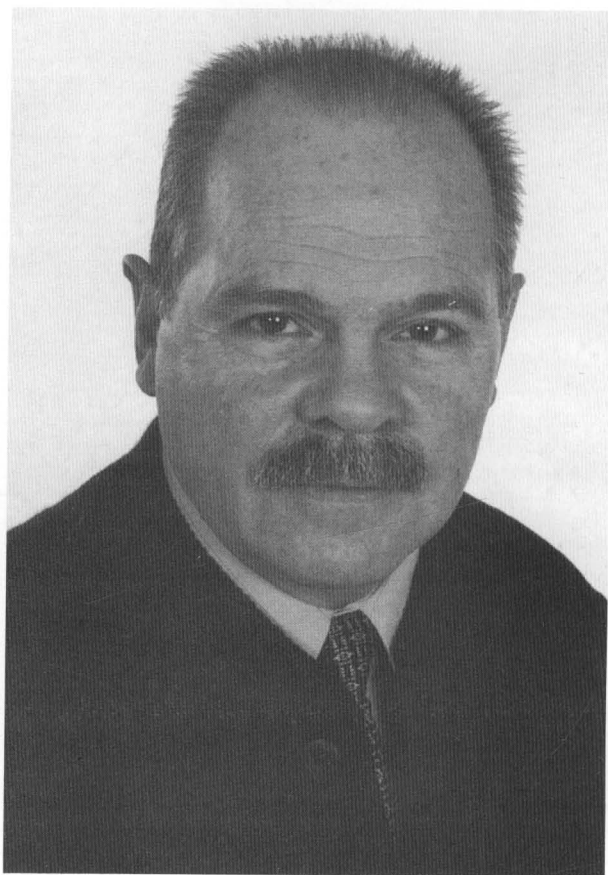




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MULTISENSORY APPROACH TO TEACHING THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED STUDENTS

EWA MARCINIAK

Educational Centre for Visually Impaired Children – Owińska

The presentation of this paper was inspired by the large number of enquiries from English teachers encountered with the responsibility of organising VI (visually impaired) students linguistic education. Some of the suggestions I shared with groups of professionals in USIS/CODN TEFL Methodology Course in Pogorzal in June, 1997 and in INSETT/WOM Lublin Course in Kazimierz Dolny in August, 1998. My position of a secondary school teacher in Owińska Centre for Blind Children gave me an opportunity to collect the observations which may be helpful for teachers who are faced, perhaps for the first time, with the VI learner's needs.

The effects of visual impairment on learning

It has been estimated that as much as 80 per cent of school work is based in some way on vision. In the light of this, it may be possible to begin to understand the problems which face the visually impaired learner in an ordinary classroom. The difficulties may be caused by poor near vision which complicates reading and writing process and other tasks involving fine detail. A severely restricted field of vision (tunnel vision – „looking through a keyhole”) effects on the ability to move around; a pace of reading quickly and finding specific places on the page is slow. Some conditions cause an overall haziness of vision, frequent headaches, extreme sensitivity to bright light, rapid eye movements (Nystagmus) which make it very hard for the person concerned to focus clearly. Methodological conclusions should be linked with the active observation of a disabled learner. Finding any overall solution to providing appropriate help to the visually impaired is very complicated. Depending on the nature of their condition they may require, for example, bright or dim light, enlarged or normal size print, hand-held low vision aids or computer equipment. The classroom teacher may encourage the efficient use of those techniques and aids which are recommended by experts and decide which methods may fulfil information gaps in the learning process limited by the impairment.

Attitudes to the impairment

People who have lost their sight suddenly, as a result of an accident, tend to find things more traumatic than people who were born blind or people who lose their sight gradually. How easily a person overcomes the difficulties depends on a number of factors. First of all each person with impaired vision as a unique human being has different needs, abilities, expectations. The teacher should recognise those individual problems and try to adjust didactical techniques to specific demands.

Access to information

For the students with a sight failure access to information is crucial. In Poland about 10.000 of total 80.000 registered blind people can read Braille. A limited amount tries to read Moon, a tactile system of reading which is based on the Roman alphabet. Others have a sufficient vision to work with large print handouts. There are also software utilities which magnify or change the colour of text, change the fonts or the background colour of the screen. Text may also be magnified by so called low technological means such as the use of a closed circuit television (CCTV) or a hand-held-magnifier. Other students benefit from speech synthesisers but others find that it is very difficult to concentrate for long periods on account of the robotic nature of the voice. It is supposed that one of the greatest advantages of using an electronic reader is that it makes the learner more independent.

Multisensory methods in teaching

Introducing these methods fulfils not only the linguistic aspect of knowledge; helps to understanding of the wider context creating a social and cultural background; improves the cognition of signs and meanings carried by vocal and visual communicates. Partially sighted and blind students often need additional data to understand language. Teacher's presentation supported by multisensual techniques gains an attractive, often experimental background and enables to select the suitable topics, tasks and materials in a creative way. Participants of the learning process can be encouraged to presentation of their own ideas. Nonvisual type of learner gets a chance of the active perception, is not dependent on technical devices which sometimes identify disabled students as different and „special”. Multisensory methods include didactical means stimulating not only sight but also other senses such as: the hearing, sense of touch, sense of smell. In multisensory approach a linguistic structure is accompanied by parallel information:

- in a pictorial form textured elements or pictures (example: prepositions introduced by raised forms; selected shapes, silhouettes or specific everyday products to illustrate meanings or to „act” situations);

- situations are presented in a musical context (natural sounds as components and a musical background are interpreted by students);
- specific topics are supported by olfactory effects (spices, essential oils, incense sticks);

Sensual components usually motivate even defensive students and being closely linked with the emotional sphere stimulate the memory process. A basic sample of a raised form is a Braille code composed of six raised dots, with two columns of three dots. There are 63 combinations of these dots. The sense of touch of the blind is not extremely better than the sighted people but this skill is practised by a constant use. The soft pad of the finger is more sensitive than the fingertip. Textured elements may be helpful in the introducing specific grammar problems: prepositions, articles, linking devices etc. The integrated learners could be encouraged to inventing shapes and siluettes as a homework assignment or a group project. Varied rods used in pronunciation drills awake imagination and activate the blind learners whose kinaesthetic ability should be stimulated. Among the materials producing any raised forms the most useful are: papier-mâché, clay, wax, dough. Linguistic situations are very often presented in a musical context. VI people are commonly thought to have special musical abilities that in some way compensate their poor vision or lack of sight. Like many such beliefs, this one contains an element of truth. A student with a limited vision may show just as much or as little musical talents any other. The teachers working in the field of visual impairment confirm the opinion that the blind since birth or shortly afterwards, will tend to learn material presented aurally more quickly, and retain it for longer and with greater precision, than with comparable group of their sighted peers. Research indicates that there are different levels of listening which are comparable to those of seeing:

1. HEARING, which implies a low level of mental activity, is simply the ear's recording the sound, comparable to „seeing”.
2. LISTENING, which implies a greater degree of mental activity and can be compared to „observing”.
3. AUDITING, which is the highest level of mental processing of the recording sound and includes listening with critical and analytical ability.

A VI student has to be encouraged to develop the more advanced auditing skills, which are not necessarily a part of normal, everyday listening activities Example of the acoustic didactical ideas: sounds of the sea accompanied by different acoustic effects (church bells, organ music) are interpreted by the learners who find associations in their memories or story-telling; sounds of the nature (birds voices) are compared to the industrial ones (a background to the discussion on the environmental problems). Additionally the suitable musical background has a stimulative effect helping to get students into a positive state of mind for other

activities, weather musical or not. Probably the most discussive way of presentation is the introduction of smells as one of multisensual techniques. Including specific aromatic materials in a regular lesson usually generates some problems for the teacher who has to consider the cost of the essential oils and possible negative effects for the learners, particularly those with asthma, allergies, high blood pressure, epilepsy and/or who are pregnant. They should be given a different assignment. One of the ideas* suggests making aromatic herbal dough beads to introducing psychological vocabulary – the natural essential oils have beneficial effect on human body and mind – some of them stimulate memory process, relax and refresh, improve concentration and other qualities. Spices, essential oils and chosen traditional products as the elements of reality create the sensual background in lessons presenting cultural information.

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* The idea and recipe by Sherill Howard-Pociecha, English Language Institute, Wrocław University.