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Identifying Problems in Teaching English to Visually Impaired Students at Special Schools

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Abstract:

This proposal focuses on identifying problems in teaching English to visually impaired students at special school and provides some solutions how to increase the quality of education. First it discusses educational setting by providing full information about students and staff, then talks about how the study was conducted.

After, existing problems, resources and data about financial aids are given one by one. Moreover, detailed goals and objectives of the proposal are included in this stage. In recommendations part all steps to overcome the problem were counted along with actors and timeline stages. This proposal aims to help visually impaired people to get a better education at schools and as a result to become an inseparable part of society by solving English language teaching issues that exist in educational settings.

Keywords: Visually impaired students, education, and solutions to problems.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays technology became an separated part of peoples' life since it enables individuals to access to new recourses and to be heard by the world. Moreover, even disabled people also are able to use internet for different purposes; for instance, Career Connect website offers data about job positions to people with visual impairment. Besides, this site shares some motivating posts from successful professions with vision loss. However, it is pity that such websites do not serve at all in Uzbekistan. It is observable that very few of visually impaired people are involved in studying at Universities and working mostly in the field of education and art. In order to be involved into social life, it is required from people with vision loss to get a good quality of education. One of the important subjects that give more job opportunities to learners is learning foreign languages, especially English. Although there are some improvements in conducting English classes to learners with visual impairment, numerous hindrances still exist. By offering high quality English lessons, visually impaired students will have a chance to become more independent and to be accepted as a member of community.

CONTEX AND BACKGROUND

Educational setting

In order to implement new changes in teaching English to visually impaired learners, the setting special school for visually impaired under #77 was chosen. This educational institute is situated in Parkent street 20, Yashnabad district, Tashkent. First launched in 1924, currently educates 369 (18 of them are between the ages of 5-6, 124 of them are 7-10, 161 learners are at the age of 11-15 and the rest 84 of them are 16-18 years old) pupils. Children at the age of school with low vision or total blind are accepted to study at this school. The government provides 12 year study (one year more that public schools) taking into consideration of pupils' cognition skills and pace of comprehension. Lessons start at 8.30 and finished at around 1 or 2 according to schedule. Students study 6-7 academic hours which lasts 45 minutes each a day, 6 days a week. English is conducted 3 times. Besides studying the common subjects that are required at public schools as well, learners of this site take courses of social studies. After the classes, students stay there as it is a boarding school. In the territory of educational site one building is given for dormitory which consist of 35 bedrooms. This school involves 170 adults to work, including 5 administrators, 67 teachers (5 of them are English teachers), 48 educators, 3 medical people and 47 in other spheres. The school consists of 3 staged 4 buildings which includes 48 classrooms and 3 staged dormitory with 35 study and bedrooms.

Political or administrative setting

The former President of Republic of Uzbekistan signed 1875 decree "On measures to further improve foreign language learning system" on December 10, 2012. Since, many changes in teaching foreign language have been implemented. Although there is no special law about improving foreign language skills of visually impaired learners, The Social Initiatives Support Fund of the Republic of Uzbekistan has been applying "Inclusive Education in Uzbekistan" project since 2007 (Mileyeva, 2013).

Statistics

There are more than 70000 visually impaired people in Uzbekistan, and 5 % of them are school students. However, problems linked to study issues exist, especially with course books. If secondary school students have an access to 130 types of course material, visual impaired learners have an opportunity to use only 18 types of them. (Zamon TV, 2018, 1:25)

According to statistics that school administration provided, in 2019, 16 students finished the site and 6 of them entered universities while 2 of them are working as a shop assistant and worker at the school itself. The rest of the alumnae are at home.

Learners

There are total-blind and partially visual impaired students at the school. Visually impaired learners have almost the same interest and behavior as sighted students: they like playing games, especially mobile games, chat during the lessons, joke with their friends and etc. Some of the school-students are very talented in drawing, singing and playing chess. Moreover, they got honorable places and medals for their participation in different contests in art and sports.

Students' proficiency level of English is different according to their grades and lower than expected to be. Elementary school pupils' level of English is beginner and elementary; high school students' proficiency level is about pre-intermediate and might be lower also.

High-school students complain that as they started learning English from 5th grade they are not good at language; furthermore, at 5th grade there was a jump in themes from alphabet to translation without learning enough vocabulary. Therefore, some of them are not interested in learning language, although they admit that it is important for them to study English.

Staff

There are only 5 teachers of English at school: 2 of them are visually impaired and 3 of them are visual teachers. The proficiency level of teachers differs from elementary to intermediate. They all graduated from university before becoming English instructors here. One of the visually impaired teachers approaches to her work very creatively by modifying course books, preparing activities with handouts, using storybook recordings to improve students' comprehension, teaching English songs and singing them during the lessons. Therefore, some of her students are very good at performing songs of their favorite stars.

Study

To research in this area, first the site was visited and had a conversation with teachers; in addition, several lessons were observed. From interviews (Appendix 1) it became clear that teachers have been working in this site for more than 5-6 years. The main problem in teaching here is "course books" as some of the students don't have them in Braille writing system. Moreover, they claimed that topics are not appropriate to their learners. Teachers stated that they use technology like mobile phones for dictionary and voice recorder for listening to audio books. They don't get any financial support from government or non profit organizations; even one of the teachers spent her own salary to print course books for her students. Teachers of this site also attend to training courses which is provided by the government each 5 years; in addition, time by time all English teachers gather together and share their knowledge and experience. By observing lessons it became obvious that teachers mostly focus on grammar-translation method where students have to translate the text and learn by heart translations of words.

Interviewing students was also considered as a valuable tool to identify strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning the language; however, reliable data was not taken because of teachers' interference to the conversation. (Appendix 2) Students know that they need English and consider this language as very important skill to enter universities and get prestigious jobs in the future; on the other hand, they admit that they are lazy and don't want to spend effort and time for learning this subject.

Existing problems

Most of the visually impaired learners of special schools suffer from lack of good education in English lessons because of *neglecting motivational issues, not applying technology devices, excluding sufficient literature materials in Braille writing system and disusing appropriate kinesthetic and moving activities in the process of teaching*. Moreover, *designing curriculum, choosing proper course materials and topics, assessing and testing students* are also circumstances that should be investigated and suggested some solutions to offer high-quality education to learners of this site.

INVENTORY

Culture

There are separate classes for Uzbek and Russian speakers. As in public schools, students of Russian groups in this school approach to learning more seriously although most of the learners are Uzbeks. In Uzbek classes,

it is noticeable that students like joking and they are less serious during the classes. Teachers of Uzbek and Russian classes also admit that working with Russian groups is easier than conducting lessons in Uzbek classes.

Recourses

Students who can see little, use **course books** with different pictures and tables to fill in. Furthermore, students who lost their sights totally are given the same course book in Braille writing system. The course book in Braille writing system was first prepared by one of the teachers about 4-5 years ago. Before, all students were supposed to use books which were intended for visual students, consequently most of them suffered.

Only one teacher uses special cards to teach vocabulary in which pictures were dotted with holes; moreover, she uses posters with big letter to explain grammar. Although one of teachers is applying new ideas into practice, some more problems in terms of course materials exist. When the course book was modified into Braille writing system, exercises with pictures and tables were omitted and adapted to visually impaired learners. Therefore, the students are not able to practice some of the meaningful exercises.

Technology during the lessons is not used widely. Students are allowed to use their mobile phones for the dictionary; however, it is not observable. Teachers have their own recordings which are used for listening to audio books and songs.

Methodology and assessment

Lessons are conducted mostly in **grammar-translation method**. The teacher uses learners' native language and English interchangeably in explaining the instructions. Every time, before starting the lesson the duty student is chosen and asked some questions about the date and absent students. During the lesson the teacher focuses on **dictation and translation exercises**. The instructor reads the text, students write it in their copy books and the teacher checks for mistakes. When students make mistakes in their speech, teacher corrects them immediately. However, praises achievement of learners as well.

The **curriculum** (Appendix 3) is designed on course book which is intended for visual learners. However, duration of time extended by adding one more academic year.

Regarding to **course book** (Appendix 4) the following problems exist:

- There are some weaknesses in the main course books **“Fly high”** and **“English”** as most teachers claim. (the one which is used by all secondary schools)
- Course books contain a lot of colorful pictures and writing exercises appropriate to visual learners;
- Modified version if a course book lacks of some important exercises;
- In modified version of course book only texts and some words left (for ex, exercises 7-12 in appendix 4 were omitted: comprehension questions for reading the text and matching synonyms, speaking and writing exercises are neglected. Instead students read the text and translate new words (Appendix 5))
- It is difficult to explain some concepts like, “industry” to visually impaired learners.

The teachers claim that curricula used in all secondary schools should be replaced by another one. However, the staff is not intended to ask from the Ministry of Education to change their materials, course books as they are afraid that their students might be accepted as people having mental problems for not being able to study

the course materials which are provided for all secondary public schools. If asked from the government to change the curriculum, teachers believe that the result might be very serious, even students of this site may lose a chance to get higher education.

Assessment at this school is based on formative assessment. Students gain their scores for participation and writing different tests during the class. Teachers evaluate learners' knowledge on vocabulary by asking translation of words, results of dictations and ability to translate from English into native language. Teachers keep students' recorded grades in a special journal.

Financial support

The government or non-profit organizations do not provide any financial support. Even some teachers spend their salary for students by printing course books in Braille system.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The main goal of the proposal is to investigate the problems that exist in learning and teaching English to visually impaired students and suggest resolutions to help them to overcome identified issues. The objectives are:

- To increase teachers' level of proficiency in language;
- To train teachers in the field of language pedagogy so that instructors will enrich their knowledge in teaching visually impaired learners;
- To motivate teachers to become more independent in choosing fiction literature and educating them in preparing materials in Braille writing system;
- To encourage both teachers and students to use technology for learning purposes;

RECOMMENDATIONS

Methodology

Communication skills is an essential key of teaching foreign languages. Students are able to acquire the language successfully if lessons focus on more authentic and meaningful materials. Moreover, activities also should prepare learners to real life conversations. Hence, communicative language teaching should be applied since students will be able to practice 4 language skills equally. Additionally, they will widen their viewpoint by discussing topics on global issues. Duff (2014) considers that communicative language teaching enables learners to communicate in another language efficiently and develops learners' fluency, confidence and autonomy in expressing ideas in a foreign language. Although learners are visually impaired, this method will prepare effective language users.

Target language features

It is important to focus on improving all 4 skills to the same extent in learning foreign languages. However, for visually impaired learners it might be difficult as they receive most of the information by hearing. Chrisidou (2016) states *"The difficulties in reading and writing in all subjects met by students with vision problems are commonly accepted, but are significantly increased in the case of learning a foreign language"*. As visually impaired students have some challenges in improving reading and writing equally along with other skills for the beginning because of not having enough resources, **teaching listening and speaking skills should be enhanced mostly**. Aslantash (2017) supports the idea that *"Experiments conducted in neuroscience*

showed that, VI (visually impaired) people have stronger verbal memory which contributes to their foreign language education". It becomes clear that visually impaired learners are not disadvantageous in learning foreign languages and even may present much better results than visual students because of storing the information what they said. Therefore, ***working on and improving speaking skills becomes very essential.***

More ***activities*** in teaching language to visually impaired students should be based on ***movement and kinesthetic skills*** which are useful for both learning the language and gaining skills in mobility and object control. Lieberman (2014) states that *"Through quality physical education programs, students with visual impairments can develop the fundamental skills needed to maintain a physically active and healthy lifestyle"*.

Technology

Lessons should be conducted in more interactive ways by involving more ***technology devices***.

Usage of information and communication technology (ICT), especially ***smart phones*** should be applied as visually impaired students can benefit a lot in learning English. Retorta (2017) claimed in her article that *"The project "English for Us" has been offered to visually-impaired students with the aim of enabling them to learn the English language using ICT; more specifically, smartphones. The idea of using a smartphone to learn a foreign language came from one of the blind students of the group"*. Students should be encouraged to use smartphones for dictionary purposes. Moreover, ***gadgets*** can be used for improving ***listening skills*** of students by motivating them to listen to different podcasts and audio books during and out of the lesson.

Implementation of computers may influence positively on studying processes by using some special programs for ***writing***. This mean of technology helps to broaden students' viewpoint by enhancing their writing and creative skills. Special programs like NVD instruct learners, pronounce and read written material so that he/she may be aware of the work and mistakes. Furthermore, two signs in the keyboard help visually impaired learners to identify letters.

Materials

The ***curriculum*** is designed on course book which is intended for visual learners. Therefore, curriculum should be modified to learners.

Regarding to course book the following suggestions are given for existing problems:

- The course book materials should be revised and adapted;
- In designing course book, all suggestions in subtopics of ***"technology"*** and ***"target language"*** should be followed;
- Before conducting new abstract themes, students should learn them in their native language and comprehend. This should be extra lesson before coming to English class.
- Special dotted and convex handouts and different statues should be used to ***teach vocabulary and grammar***.
- Some literature books are supposed to be shifted into Braille writing system gradually by teachers or volunteer participants.

Proficiency level of students

By implementing all these changes into study process, proficiency level of students is expected to increase. Primary school pupils should have A1 level of English; elementary students should reach the level between A2 and B1. At high school students are supposed to become B 2 when they graduate 12th grade.

Assessment

Along with course book and methodology modifications, assessment also should be changed. Assessment should be used to compare students' knowledge before and after taking the course. Additionally, by assessing learners, teachers should be able to find out the difficulties that students are facing. Students' scores should be based on *formative* (on-going process, assessing for learning) and *summative assessments* (exams, assessing of learning) (Brown, 2010). In one quarter learners should take **one mid-term and one final test** according to the covered materials. Besides, **alternative assessment** (project works) is also included and scored separately as it is considered very beneficial. (Brown, 2010) **Participation, attendance and homework** are also important features to evaluate learners. In order to broaden learners' horizon reading (if available) or listening **extra literature materials** are required from students. They are supposed to read or listen to three fictions during the quarter. Teacher checks their comprehension by asking several questions at the end of each lesson.

The following table demonstrates approximate assessment that can be used at school:

<i>Tasks</i>	<i>%</i>
Participation	10 %
Attendance	10%
Homework	10%
Extra literature materials	10%
Final	20%
Project work	20%
Mid-term	20%

Proficiency level of teacher

In order to get a high quality education, it is required to have **well-educated teachers**. In the case of teaching English, the level of teachers is supposed to be at least **B2**; moreover, they should have **pedagogical skill** in conducting lessons. Taking into consideration teachers' level of visually impaired learners' school, first 6 month language courses and then 6 month teacher training programs should be offered. So that they will be educated in *designing curriculum and effective activities to improve all language skills based on kinesthetic and moving activities, choosing appropriate course materials and topics, assessing and testing students including motivation, applying suitable teaching methodology, using technology devices, and implementing only English policy during the classes.*

New approach

While investigating the ways of teaching English successfully to visually impaired students, it became clear that those learners first need to become autonomous; moreover, they need to have a broad viewpoint on common knowledge in order to understand some concepts in non-native language. In Northern Ireland schools benefited from shared education by building relationships among schools, exchanging recourses and

encouraging equality (Over 59,000 pupils benefit from shared education, n.d.). That is why *shared education* will be one of the solutions where visually impaired students get a chance to study English at least once a week with their visual peers and expand their perspectives.

ACTORS

Zhao (2011) claims that “actors” are vitally important and obligatory point to be taken into consideration in language planning and policy. As this topic of issue is very broad, many actors are involved to participate. Although the main actors, school administration, teachers, students of the school and their parents have a big impact on providing better education to visually impaired learners, other minor actors as individuals, peers of visually impaired students, other school administrations and teachers, and volunteers also should be engaged into the process.

The main actors:

- **School administration:** They first have to find out problems and see the need for change. If administration is interested in implementing new ideas into education process, it will be easy to apply the plan.
- **Non-governmental organizations/ Ministry of Finance:** All changes are in need of financial support to get a result at the end. These organizations are involved to supply with required budget for teacher-trainers, course materials and technology devices.
- **Teacher-trainers:** Those professions are responsible to increase proficiency level of teachers and conduct training programs where teachers of special school will learn to design appropriate curriculum for effective lessons and meaningful assessment. Consequently, the lessons become more efficient and visually impaired students not only learn English, but also improve their mobility and social skills.
- **Teachers:** They are the main sources for students to get knowledge and practice language skills. Teachers are in the center of all changes.
- **Students:** These actors are main people as everything is done for their education. If they use the given opportunity wisely, there is a great possibility that they reach high picks in learning language and implementing the knowledge into their life.
- **Parents of learners:** Parents are also very crucial in the process as there is a strong bond between them; additionally, they are main motivators of learners.
- **Psychologists:** These specialists are vital to help to both students and teachers. When students fail in something, psychologists know how to motivate them.
- **IT specialists:** As great amount of technology use is involved in conducting lessons to visually impaired students, IT specialists are essential to explain to both teachers and students ways of using tools and software programs;
- **Teacher assistances:** Everyday teachers have 5-6 lessons with mixture of groups from grade 5 till 12 and it is impossible for them to be prepared to all lessons in a high quality. Hence, teacher assistances are vital in helping teachers to organize different activities and handouts appropriate for visual impaired learners.

Minor actors:

- **People with influence:** These are the people who are well-known in the society, for instance, politicians, actors, singers and etc. These people should be encouraged to make motivating videos, speeches, or

posters to improve education of visually impaired learners. So that more and more people will be interested in project; moreover, this approach will inspire visually impaired learners to study and be accepted by other members of society;

- **Other school administrations and peers of learners:** Applying shared education, where students with visual impairment get a chance to visit other schools to study English with their peers once a week. As a result, they improve their language skills during the lessons and exchange their ideas with their friends. Integrated study helps visually impaired learners to enhance their mobility which is required to have active and independent lifestyle. In addition, they will be accepted more optimistically by the society after discovering their positive sides.
- **Volunteers:** These people willingly help for example in modifying course materials into Braille writing system;
- **Individuals:** These are individuals who just respect all visually impaired people and teach younger generation to accept them as a member of society;

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

In order to reach the goals counted in the proposal, a financial support is required. All expenses will be covered by sponsors and special non-governmental organizations like “**Ko`zi ojizlar jamiyati**” and “**Mehr nuri**”. When the program is ready to administer through the country by implementing it to all special schools, **Ministry of Finance** will be responsible for funding. Furthermore, world organizations like “**World Blind Union**”, “**International Glaucoma Association**”, and “**International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI)**” might be invited to help learners with visual impairment to provide a better education.

TIMELINE

The process of implementing all these changes is divided into 3 phases. The first two phases concentrate on language *planning in micro level* while the last one is in *macro language planning*.

In the **first phase**, which is estimated to take one year, the *proficiency level of teachers* should be increased and they have to take *teacher training programs* which will help them to shape their understanding about high quality language teaching. At the same time, *technology* problems should be solved and applied to use by both teachers and learners. Implementing “*shared education*” should be taken in this phase.

In the **second phase** when teachers are qualified enough, they with specialists should *design new curriculum* suitable for visually impaired students, appropriate course books, and effective student assessment which bring to successful leaning results. Moreover, students should get an access to *literature books* which will be helpful to broaden their horizon about the world. In this stage, teachers should be motivated to change fictions to Braille system by getting some bonuses, or another solution is involving volunteers to help teachers. It may probably require about 2 years in order to make a full shift at this school.

The third phase, implementing changes in macro level, in all special schools of Uzbekistan, may involve next 2 years considering curriculum, assessment system and course books are ready to use.

CONCLUSION

Gaining the knowledge of foreign languages, especially English is valuable for visually impaired people in defining their roles in the community. It requires some effort, time and budget to provide such opportunities;

however, a well-developed language planning may provide enormous prosperities by considering all strengths and weaknesses of the issue. This proposal offers some reasonable suggestions to teach English successfully to learners with visual impairment so that they will become a real member of the society by using their gained knowledge.

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