GOOD PRACTICE FOR IMPROVING LANGUAGE LEARNING FOR VISUALLY IMPAIRED ADULTS

PROJECT

"PEDAGOGY AND LANGUAGE LEARNING FOR BLIND AND PARTIALLY SIGHTED ADULTS IN EUROPE"

SUMMARY

PREAMBLE

Language skills are part of the core skills that each citizen of European societies needs to be able to acquire and update throughout their life. Firstly because understanding and speaking other languages offers the opportunity of meeting other people, access to cultural diversity, and also represents a source of personal fulfilment. Secondly because mastering various languages opens more job opportunities in societies with a high degree of economic interaction and makes it easier to move around within the European Union.

Improving the accessibility of language learning for visually impaired (VI) persons, i.e. blind or partially sighted people, is a common goal of the European Blind Union (EBU, France), the Pancyprian Organization of the Blind (POB, Cyprus), Czech Blind United (SONS, Czech Republic) and the Slovak Blind and Partially Sighted Union (UNSS, Slovakia). All of them agree on the fact that their national teaching infrastructures are not adapted to the specific needs of VI adults wishing to learn a foreign language. In fact existing non-adaptive approaches, techniques and teaching tools (interactivity, visual-based modules, pictograms, lack of materials in Braille…) actually deter VI adults from choosing courses involving the development of this key skill. In this area, the research in pedagogical engineering is very limited and thus cannot benefit everybody.

Therefore EBU, POB, SONS and UNSS united within the Grundtvig Learning Partnership "Pedagogy and Language Learning for Blind and Partially Sighted Adults in Europe". From 2008 to 2010 the project enabled the partners to work together on the central issue of the social and professional integration of VI adults through the improvement of their accessibility to language education. In particular, partners focused their work on how to reinforce the competences of language teachers in mainstream settings.

As a reminder, the Grundtvig Learning Partnership programme is a framework for small-scale co-operation activities between organisations working in the field of adult education in the broadest sense. Transnational meetings between the organisations involved in the partnership, exchanges of staff and adult students, exchanges of experience and good practice, fieldwork, project research, etc. aim at promoting the circulation of good practice, maximising the value of the transnational exchange, and thus ensuring the wider impact of results.

During the project, the partners tackled several issues through transnational meetings and local working groups: the situation of VI adults in their countries, the curricula of language teachers, the existing teaching approaches and tools for language learning and the extent to which these are adapted to the specific needs of VI adults wishing to learn or update their foreign language skills.

This document presents the work carried out by the partners during the project, and suggests pathways towards improvements.

I.   AN OVERVIEW OF THE NEEDS OF VI ADULT STUDENTS

To make this overview possible, it is useful to examine:

> ➢ The number of VI adults wishing to learn/update a foreign language
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> ➢ The motivation of VI adults wanting to join language courses
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> ➢ The qualifications/diplomas of VI adults willing to learn/update a foreign language
>
> ➢ The main difficulties encountered by VI adults in learning languages

> ## ➢ Indication of the proportion of VI adults who would like to learn languages

Whether it is in Cyprus, in France, in the Czech Republic or in Slovakia, there are no official and precise statistics concerning VI adults who would like to learn a foreign language. Quantitative data can essentially be obtained through associations dedicated to visual impairment, which of course means that the information is incomplete.

For instance, in France, at the GIAA level (Group of blind and partially sighted intellectuals[1]), there are on average 15 people from all ages every year asking if there is a method in Braille to learn a language and if it has been adapted.

In Cyprus, in 2009, there were about 50 VI adults who were willing to learn languages. In practice, when the Pancyprian Organisation of the Blind offered language courses to adults in three different towns in Cyprus, 42 adults attended the specific courses. Another nine VI people from Cyprus expressed their interest in learning the Italian language, responding to a call from the organization.

In Slovakia, there are just a few blind or partially sighted people learning languages within mainstream language courses. Most of them prefer to study alone at home using

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[1] http://www.giaa.org/

more accessible sources such as internet or ready adapted e-books. However there is no precise quantitative data available.

For the Czech Blind United – SONS, information gathered from their members through questionnaires about language learning showed that the number of students is surprisingly higher than expected. VI adults generally study in special courses for the blind and partially sighted or privately – one-to-one or in small groups. Only rarely do people attend language schools especially when they have to use Braille books for their studies.

This lack of statistics can be explained by the lack of accessible material and learning possibilities which discourage VI persons from looking for adapted teaching modules. When they face difficulties, blind and partially sighted adults willing to learn languages therefore try to do by themselves with the help of friends thanks to accessible electronic documents on USB sticks/CDs/computers or thanks to evening courses. When dealing with non-Latin alphabets, the proportion of VI adults who would like to learn languages and find it difficult to have access to courses is even more difficult to quantify.

➢ **Main motivation of VI adults willing to learn languages**

The need for competence in foreign languages is increasing throughout society, younger people study foreign languages in the mainstream school system, and adults are trying to fill the gaps in their language education in various ways. Their motivations are twofold: professional and personal.

Professional motivation:
- Finding a job: a person who went to university and is looking for a job can feel the need to resume studies;
- Increasing employment choices by improving job qualifications;
- Increasing chances for career advancement: adults can be asked to improve their language skills by their employer (generally through in-house training

or further education). Generally speaking the knowledge of languages often constitutes a basic qualification for promotion in the workplace;

- International mobility: making travel for professional reasons easier and more efficient;

- International communication: enabling more fluent communication with colleagues, clients and suppliers from abroad, either on the phone or in a written form;

- Attending seminars in other countries as part of their work requirements;

- Serving customers: a number of jobs traditionally open to VI persons (call centres or switch board operators, masseurs, physiotherapists, tourism professionals) are evolving and employees increasingly need to speak foreign languages in order to serve customers efficiently. Language learning is a way to retain such jobs.

Personal motivation:

- Discovering or better understanding the culture of other countries;

- Willingness to strengthen linguistic skills or to refresh memory without any precise objective;

- Recreational learning:
    - As a hobby or pastime
    - Socializing with other adult students
    - Socializing with foreigners
    - Accessing international media
    - Simply enjoying the sound of another language

- Strengthening learners' capacity for international mobility: increased communication abilities when travelling abroad make people feel more independent;

- Being able to take part in various international events/camps;

- Widening the scope of radio stations which can be listened to and books which can be read, as well as websites which can be explored while surfing on the Internet, broadening the scope of accessible information, and being able to chat with other people and make new friends;

- Being able to help children with their homework. Nowadays, students have more compulsory language courses than in the past.

What can be pointed out is that in the partner countries there are no remarkable differences between the reasons why VI people start learning foreign languages and those of sighted people. VI people, like almost everybody else, learn languages within the framework of the obligatory education system, and can wish or need to update their knowledge or to learn a new language.

In fact the differences are most evident in the way they choose to perform the learning process itself, due to the noticeably fewer opportunities for them to achieve their foreign language goals.

➢ **Qualifications/diplomas of VI adults willing to learn languages**

In France, generally speaking, VI adults willing to learn languages are not real beginners. If they are beginners in a specific language, they already speak several other languages. While the majority of VI language students have a level of education situated between year 11 and year 13 (of the English system), a certain number of undergraduates and postgraduates constitute a minority.

In Cyprus, the educational level of VI adults willing to learn languages varies:
- Some of the language students have a university degree or diploma, while some others are high school graduates.
- University graduates usually wish to refresh their knowledge in a language or learn a new language.

- High school graduates usually have a basic knowledge of a language and they need to improve it.

Nowadays in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, students have to study one foreign language as part of their primary and secondary education and there is a compulsory school-leaving exam in a foreign language at the end of upper-secondary education. Most students choose English.

In the Czech Republic, VI adults do not usually hold a degree in foreign languages, except for students who completed their secondary education before 1989 and had to take a final exam in the Russian language. Most VI foreign language students have completed their secondary education; however, language courses also interest university graduates and people with a more basic education.

In Slovakia, the qualifications of VI language students vary from vocational training students through secondary school students and include university graduates.

The conclusion which is drawn by the partners, the European Blind Union, the Pancyprian Organization of the Blind, the Czech Blind United and the Slovak Blind and Partially Sighted Union is that a VI person willing to learn a foreign language is not influenced by his/her level of education but rather by the accessibility of learning materials or language courses.

However, as illustrated in the following section, such material is not evenly accessible throughout the different teaching institutions.

➢ **Main difficulties encountered by VI adults in learning languages**

Among the different kinds of difficulties encountered by VI adults, some are directly related to the teaching methods implemented in the partner countries. These include:

- The teaching approach: lack of skilled teaching staff, staff unaware of specific needs; sighted-based courses; audiovisual tools; lack of digitalised books,

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- The organisation of teaching: composition of groups, scheduling of classes, etc.

Concerning the teaching approach:

The teaching approach covers the skills of language teachers and the methods and tools they use when teaching.

- **Lack of awareness of what visual impairment is and implies**

Most teachers, including language teachers, are not familiar with the concept of sight loss and its consequences for the students. In fact the term "people with sight loss" covers a wide range of people who have incurable sight loss. The definitions of blindness and partial sight, as well as the registration criteria and mechanisms, vary between European member states. However, to give a general idea doctors (ophthalmologists) in several European countries decide if someone can be considered as blind or partially sighted on the following conditions:

- A person can register as blind if they can only read the top letter of the optician's eye chart from three metres or less.
- A person can register as partially sighted if they can only read the top letter of the chart from six metres or less.

This lack of awareness of what sight loss is, of what VI people can and cannot do, and sometimes of how to behave in front of VI persons (whether or not to shake hands, is it a faux pas to say "Do you *see* what I mean?"; etc.) limits the possibilities for teachers to adapt their approaches to the needs of VI people.

- **Lack of adapted learning materials**

Pedagogy is mostly sight-based, and courses rely on visual perception and the audiovisual approach. Most text-books are inaccessible to VI students, for they include lots of pictures and graphic solutions (e.g. inserts to illustrate grammar etc.). This makes it difficult for the learner to access the knowledge proffered

by such images and abstract representations. As a consequence VI students have to make an additional effort to search for information missed during the language lessons due to over-visualised sources.

- **Lack of adapted techniques and assistive technology**

ICTs are a means for VI people to compensate visual impairment (thanks to screen readers, voice synthesis, scanners, etc.), however such technology is rarely available in language classes in universities and training centres. This prevents VI students from easily accessing teaching materials.

Concerning the organisation of teaching :

- **Composition of classes**

There is a difficulty in composing classes. Some adults may have low vision and prefer to read large print. Depending on the eye condition, some of those people need more light while some others cannot read with much light. What is more, some Braille readers are quite fast, while some others are slow.

- **Timetables**

Courses for adults are often planned in the evening. Such scheduling can be difficult to manage even for sighted people, and it is even trickier for VI people whose lack of mobility (using public transport or being driven by somebody) is a major issue to tackle.

In addition, other factors can be obstacles to VI adults wanting to get involved in mainstream language learning. These are not related to the teaching system in itself but rather to the difficulties with which VI people are faced concerning infrastructure and mobility. For instance:

- Teaching centres are mainly located in big cities. Only a few of them are situated in the suburbs and these may not have access to the necessary

equipment or knowledge for adapting the learning material to the needs of the learner.

- Those who live in cities usually depend on other people to drive them to the language centre and they may not always be available. The difficulty is increased when the learner lives in an isolated place.

- In Cyprus, there is little public transport, and buses do not cover the whole island. At the same time, taxis are quite expensive for students to use regularly to go to a university or a teaching centre.

This can lead adult students to prefer private lessons.

II.   THE TRAINING OF LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN CYPRUS, THE CZECH REPUBLIC, FRANCE AND SLOVAKIA: SHARED DIAGNOSIS

As pointed out in the previous section, VI adults have specific needs which currently are not met by the universities, training centres and teaching organs in Cyprus, France, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

To further expand knowledge of the national contexts, a shared diagnosis has been drafted concerning:

➢ The degree required to become a language teacher in France, Cyprus, the Czech Republic and Slovakia,

➢ The existing training courses for language teachers in those countries,

➢ The reference frames of such training courses.

➢ **Degree required to become a language teacher for adults in each partner country**

In France, before obtaining the Adult Training and Development Certificate mentioned above, future teachers for adults must first pass a master's degree in Foreign Languages, Literature and Civilisations. Students are encouraged to work as language teaching assistants in secondary schools or in universities or colleges in the country where the foreign language is spoken.

In Slovakia, future language teachers for adults are required to pass the so called "State Exam".

The Cypriot Master's degree in Language Teaching can be acquired at the University of Cyprus or at any University in Greece or any other university abroad, provided that it is acknowledged by the Republic of Cyprus. Language teachers willing to work in public schools then have to complete a one-year educational programme. This

programme includes various courses such as educational psychology and special education.

In the Czech Republic, to be a language teacher for adults, people2 must have a high school education and a master's degree in the Accredited Educational Programme in the area of Pedagogic Sciences OR in the area of Social Sciences focused on Languages OR in the high school programme of Lifelong Education. Also, they are required to have the minimum of language exam C1 within the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

> **Existing training programmes to become a language teacher for adults in each partner country**

In all four countries, future language teachers need at least a master's degree in Modern Languages to teach adults.

In France, language teachers who wish to teach adults in state-run education centres must obtain the Adult Training and Development Certificate, provided by the main French Vocational Education and Training Organisation (AFPA). It is a course common to all teachers, whatever the subject taught, although specific tools for teaching languages are designed and available. It is a one-year long training course which comprises adult learning theory and practice, needs assessment and instructional design.

Language teachers in Slovakia can gain the skills required to teach languages to adults in various universities such as the Comenius University (either at the Faculty of Education or the Faculty of Arts).

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[2] According to Act no. 563/2004, Collection of Law, on pedagogic workers, § 12.

In Cyprus, there is no specific programme to prepare language teachers for adults. Nevertheless, students in language teaching can follow non-compulsory adult training courses at university.

In the Czech Republic, both the Charles University in Prague and the Masaryk´s University in Brno have special training programmes to become language teachers for adults either in their Teaching Faculty or in their Philosophy Faculty.

> ➢ **Reference frames of these training programmes**

The French master's degree in Foreign Languages, Literature and Civilisations comprises the following courses: linguistics[3], literature, history, morphology, phonetics, translation, computer studies, use of ICTs and didactics of foreign languages. Students can also follow an optional course on how to teach French as a foreign language.

In Slovakia, the subjects in the State Exam are: linguistics, morphology and syntax, phonetics and phonology, semantics and pragmatics, literature, and didactics[4]. In addition students have to take part in practical training which comprises observation of lessons (the number of which is defined by each university) and consequently managing a teaching process in real classroom conditions. This is always done in cooperation with experienced language teachers who provide the student with appropriate feedback.

The Cypriot Master's degree in Language Teaching comprises the following courses: linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, morphology and syntax, phonetics and

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[3] Theory of language.
[4] Theory of language teaching.

phonology[5], semantics and pragmatics, literature, general and educational psychology, exposure to the various techniques and methods for teaching a language, and creating a lesson plan. Future language teachers teach in classes for a certain time under the guidance and supervision of professionals, who provide them with feedback.

In the Czech Republic, reference frames of the master's degree must include[6] a particular branch of science (e.g. English studies) and pedagogic and psychological education. Although it is not compulsory, it can also include andragogy[7], didactics, and special pedagogic skills (i.e. for students with special educational needs).

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[5] Study of the sound system of a given language.
[6] According to Act no. 561/2004, Collection of Law, school law, §4
[7] Methods or techniques used to teach adults

III. SKILLS FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING LANGUAGES TO VI ADULTS

It appears that in none of the partner countries do specific training program/units to teach VI adults exist. However teaching foreign languages to VI adults requires conveying specific skills, as is illustrated in the section "An overview of VI adult students". It is therefore necessary to identify the specific skills to be mastered by language teachers in order to efficiently enable VI adults to appropriate or update a foreign language. Here the term "skills" covers three fields:

> ➢ Awareness of what visually impairment is,
> ➢ Specific teaching approach,
> ➢ Using specific materials.

> ➢ **Awareness of what visually impairment is**
>   - Knowledge of the specificities of VI persons (including rights and special services),
>   - Psychology of the VI learner focusing on the nature and severity of the visual impairment,
>   - Understanding the varying needs (blind/partially sighted, different degrees of visual impairment),
>   - Many adult students become blind late in life. Sight loss at a later stage in life involves traumatic experiences which the teacher must take on board in the teaching method.

> ➢ **Specific teaching approach**
>   - Using of alternative sensory modes
>   - Increase use of accessible audio-visual methods alongside aural methods
>   - Providing input, context and feedback
>   - Development of paradigmatic thinking
>   - Ability to guide a VI person
>   - Teacher-student interaction in one-on-one and small classes

- Avoiding teaching techniques which adult students could perceive as "childish".

➢ **Specific equipment and materials**
- Multimedia: CD, MP3, hybrid book
- Tactile documents such as Braille-type textbooks, tactile graphics
- Digitalised textbooks

This implies that it is preferable the teacher knows how to:

- Adapt the written material and the classroom setting to the varying visual needs of the students.
- By doing so, provide information and teaching materials in formats accessible to VI students (large print, Braille, tactile drawings, audio, models, electronic documents, etc.)

What can be organised to provide the European language teaching community with these skills? Innovative suggestions are made in the following section.

IV.   SUGGESTIONS FOR A RENEWED PEDAGOGY FOR TEACHING VI ADULTS

➤ Introduction to the international right to information

As a preamble it should be remembered that all individuals must be given equal access to courses whatever the setting and that every visually impaired learner must be provided with adapted materials. Access to information is very important to ensure that blind and partially sighted people are not excluded from important sectors of social and economic life.

This right to information is internationally recognised:

- Article 19 of the International Convention of Civil and Political Rights states: "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice."

- Article 24 – *Education* - of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that: "State parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others."

The right to information applied in practice implies that:

- All information aimed at the general public should be made available in alternative formats for blind and partially sighted people (Braille, large print, spoken word in accessible electronic documents on USB sticks, other media), without undue delay and at no additional cost. All other documents should be provided in alternative formats on request.

- Information provided over the Internet should be fully accessible to blind and partially sighted people.

- The availability of alternative formats should be widely advertised and promoted.
- Information provision budgets should include the cost of producing alternative formats.
- Representatives of blind and partially sighted people should be included in discussions on the production of materials, particularly for information campaigns.

➢ Prerequisites for successful participation of VI students in language courses

There are important prerequisites for adult language students to participate successfully in language courses. Before applying for a language course a person with visual impairment must know which skills are needed to use teaching materials, to attend and follow class activities, and to communicate with teachers and classmates. Development of such skills is not a part of the language course. If they are not sufficiently developed, then preliminary training is needed, depending on the predominant teaching methods accessible in a given course for the VI student.

If a VI person wants to attend a language course where Braille teaching materials are used, good Braille reading skills are required. If this is not the case, it is practically impossible to develop such skills before the course in an acceptable time period. Moreover, the time required to learn such skills is prolonged and maximal achievable speed of reading is reduced substantially by age and in different ways for different individuals. In this case the use of audio-aural and/or computer-aided teaching methods are preferred rather than beginning long-term Braille training with uncertain results when it comes to achieving a reasonable speed of reading.

If the course is based on the use of accessible electronic teaching documents and computer-aided communication, good computer skills, including the knowledge of assistive technology, are required. If this is not the case, then preliminary training is needed. Training of computer skills with the support of assistive technology could be

made more compact and its duration limited to a few weeks. Therefore this kind of preliminary training should not cause any substantial delay in language learning.

Of course, successful participation in language courses could also be backed-up by other social-rehabilitation skills like mobility skills, daily living skills, and social communication skills, thus improving the independence of the VI person in a new and unknown environment and assisting in their inclusion in groups of people without visual impairment. It is obvious that an adult blind or partially sighted person will not start with a language course as their first activity after becoming visually impaired. There is a high probability that some of the above mentioned training may have already been accomplished before making a decision about applying for a language course. In any case, it is strongly recommended to consult the course requirements and methods, and to discuss required preliminary training in advance with the course provider and specialized institutions for the social rehabilitation and training of VI persons.

> ➢ **Developing new skills for language teachers**

These new skills have to be developed according to the needs previously identified concerning:

- Awareness of what visual impairment is,
- Specific teaching approaches,
- Mastering of specific study material…
- …to which should be added guidelines for the organisation of teaching

> ➢ **Building awareness about visual impairment among staff in universities and teaching centres**

All non-specialised teachers are bound to work with VI adults. Therefore they should be encouraged to acquire more knowledge through specific training which should cover:

- Basic facts and figures about sight loss.

- Psychological implications of visual impairment to secure the best interaction possible

- Alternative sensory modes: sight is not the only means of perception to be used in the group even with non-disabled students (audio, text, kinaesthetic, touch).

- Information about the tools and equipment blind and partially sighted people use to read.

- Information about different formats. What are they?

- Organisational policies on how to produce information in different formats.

- Production of information packs and fact sheets.

- Sources of further information and advice, e.g. associations dedicated to people with visual impairment; educational resource centres that provide teaching materials in accessible formats (large print, Braille, DAISY[8], tactile drawings, audio, models, etc.).

➢ Developing a specific teaching approach

As regards the specific teaching approach, two ways of proceeding can be distinguished:

- Improving the current methods by taking into account the specific needs of VI students

- Implementing a new teaching approach, such as the Realia method

- Current methods of teaching languages can be improved by introducing tips which can be easily included in the daily practice of teachers as soon as they have become aware of their specific duties regarding VI students. The following recommendations can be made to teachers:

- **Use of the blackboard**: tell the students what is being written on the blackboard, **Spell out-loud** difficult or new words so that blind students can write them down. Do not write too many words at a time, use **large, neat handwriting** so that VI students can read it easily.

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[8] DAISY (Digital Audio-based Information System) is a system of hard- and software used to record, store, transfer and read talking books. For more information: http://www.daisy.org/

- **Showing pictures, posters, etc:** first provide a simple description, then supplement with more detailed information. Use pictures with contrasting colours and large print for students with low vision. Always be specific when referring to items in the picture, avoiding "here", "there", "this one" and similar expressions that do not allow clear mental representation.

- **Oral communication**: address the students by their names before giving cues or asking them to do something (turn-taking must be clearly explained), give more **verbal feedback** (assessment).

  Some VI students may have difficulties observing some conventions when interacting. Work activities in pairs must be clearly **introduced** and **explained** in order to reassure some students.

- **Ensure that all the VI students hear you enter or leave the classroom**. Use natural language, even vision related – VI people really do not mind and are used to hearing it. However, beware of verbalism: some words and notions may require more explanation to become meaningful (use other senses to help mental representation).

- **Choice of seat**: ask the students where they wish to sit, depending on their visual or technical needs (natural lighting, near the door for quicker access, near a socket if they use a computer). VI adult students may know their limits or potential, do not be afraid to ask them what they need.

- **Adapting tools**: already-existing material should be adapted into accessible tools favouring a **multi-sensorial approach**.

  → *Visual (for partially sighted students)*

  Textbook images and **photos** can be used and should not be automatically discarded. However, for students with low vision, they must be selected and adapted according to specific criteria: **not overloaded** with details (bright and contrasting colours are best). Beware, for low vision people, A3 format is not suitable for fast eye-scanning and for easy handling. It is preferable to

use A4 format with clear layout and contrasting colours. Moreover black and white photocopies are often bad quality. Students with low vision may need to use Braille as a complement to their visual perception. This means that all Braille readers are not necessarily blind and images can also be used as teaching tools.

Typed reading materials: line spacing is sometimes important for some VI readers (1,5 or double spacing). Large print materials will be necessary for some, using a font size of 14 or 16 on average. Font size will depend on the student's visual needs. Bold letters are not always required.

For blind students, images can be **depicted** to them by a sighted person (specific questions), or a short, factual and objective **written description** can replace the photograph.

→ *Text*

Text formats given to the students may be .doc, .txt, .rtf or .html files. The texts should be clearly typed, in a font and size adapted to each learner's needs; this is, of course, very demanding as regards document preparation. The font colour should not necessarily be black, different colours can be used to differentiate menus, lists etc; Arial, Times New Roman and Taoma are often preferred by students. Various colours or sizes should be used to help the VI readers orient themselves more easily on the page – however, not all VI people can see colours.

If there are questions referring to the text, they should be clearly numbered, if need be with spaced lines.

- Vocabulary: Vocabulary lists should be clearly organized in the order in which the new words are met in the text, or in alphabetic order, their structure depending on the document they refer to (with or without quotations or examples of use). Several short lists are easier to use than a single long one, and help avoid eye tiredness. For Braille users, a dash before each new word at the beginning of the line makes it easier for

learning (each new word reference must be easily discriminated for faster learning).

- Exercises: They should preferably be short for beginners. If the exercise consists of matching words with others or with meanings, columns should be replaced by lists, one using numbers and the other using letters, thus helping the learner to do the task. Gaps should be numbered so that the student can use the numbers to locate them on a sheet: this is more specific to Braille users as they can't write in gaps in a pre-embossed Braille text.

Too many blank lines are useless in Braille texts: more than one blank at a time does not facilitate reading and only makes the document more cumbersome.

→ *Audio*

A VI person's sense of hearing is no better than that of a sighted person. However, generally, they are used to treating oral information more efficiently and for longer periods of time. Nonetheless, they need to improve their listening skills and the **audio sources or materials** must be of **good quality** and the content meaningful. **Auditory clues** (e.g. meaningful sounds) will be a plus to help them understand unknown words and develop their listening skills, without the existence of visual materials.

Pre-listening tasks will be necessary (use of short listening grids for instance).

The simultaneous use of listening, reading and note taking activities in Braille can be cumbersome even impossible for some poorly experienced Braille readers on paper or very VI students who lack speed.

→ *Kinaesthetic*

Use the body, make gestures to convey meaning, e.g. prepositions of place through mime movements with hands. Learning by doing is sometimes a feasible option.

- **The use and handling of real objects in language teaching**: In language teaching, real objects (also called REALIA) can be used in class to improve students' understanding of other cultures and real life situations. However, they must be used occasionally, as teaching aids to introduce basic concrete notions, basic grammar points and as "prompts" during speaking activities.

Foreign languages teachers often employ REALIA with beginners to strengthen their students' associations between words and the objects themselves. Nonetheless, they often rely on images or flash cards to do so (wider choice, gain of time).

With VI students, the real things are better than visual or tactile representations of them (even with advanced students). Moreover, with VI students at beginner and elementary levels in foreign languages who are computer illiterate, this teaching approach can be easily used and requires little or no technical adaptation. Besides, computer technology is not always available or accessible in every class.

Simple approaches and basic tools are often necessary and have proved efficient in the early stages of language learning. Diverse objects or pieces of furniture are often readily available in the classroom, if this is not the case they can be brought in and stored in a large box for repeated use. However, they must be selected according to some criteria in order to meet specific teaching goals:

Physical features of REALIA:
- Relatively small and easy to handle objects
- Familiar, easily recognisable objects
- Bright colours (use of residual sight by some VI students), real textures if possible
- Generating characteristic sounds (glass, coins, keys)
- Different shapes and sizes

Contents of the toolbox:

- Keys, foreign coins, books, pens, pieces of fruit (made of plastic or felt), postcards (small ones, large ones, representing well-known people and places), glasses (made of glass or plastic); watches, small boxes, envelopes (white and brown), animal toys (stuffed, plastic), small items of clothing, etc.

- The students will quickly become acquainted with these objects, as they can be used in different teaching situations and with different objectives.

Teaching objectives:

- Introduce and practice basic vocabulary/grammar points in the target language – there is no need to translate from the start (concrete language)

- Develop listening/speaking skills

- Explicit grammar points/notions related to the concrete environment: quantifiers, numbers, articles, place of adjectives, prepositions of place

- Functions: giving orders, proposing, asking for something, making comparisons, locating objects, etc.

- Develop communication skills (speaking in pairs)

Furthermore, even among advanced students, the handling of objects or direct reference to the surrounding environment can enhance their attention, interest (fun aspect) and imagination.

Finally, the teacher can teach more easily and for longer periods of time in the target language when introducing new vocabulary or grammar points, and the VI students' attention is maintained for longer periods of time.

Prerequisites:

- Their handling requires physical contact and specific verbal indications between the teacher and the VI students (handing objects, placing them in front of the students). Blind students must be informed beforehand.

- Some students may have certain difficulties identifying some objects quickly with their hands.

- Sufficient time and encouragement must be given.

Caption of the picture: The toolbox, a compilation of familiar objects used in "English for beginners" classes for VI adults.

➤ **Mastering specific equipment and material**

Language teachers should be capable of adapting the written material and the classroom setting to the varying visual needs of the students, which means providing information and teaching material in formats accessible to VI students (large print, Braille, tactile drawings, audio, models, electronic documents, etc.)

The European Blind Union and its members have produced "Guidelines for producing accessible information" which lists good practice in this field.

The following is considered as overall good practice:

▪ **Printed information**

Good standards of print legibility help all readers. Not only blind and partially sighted people have problems reading badly designed publications. Clear print benefits everyone. Producing information in legible print is neither difficult nor expensive.

- **Print size**: EBU recommends that a minimum point size of 12 should be used for standard print documents.

- **Colour and contrast**: the contrast between the background and the text is a vital factor in legibility. The stronger the contrast, the more legible the text will be. The size and weight of the font will affect the contrast. Black text on a white background provides the best contrast.

- **Typeface**: Avoid italic, simulated handwriting and ornate typefaces. If possible use a common sans-serif typeface like Arial or Helvetica.

- **Overall design and layout**:
  o Use left alignment and allow for equal spacing between words, and generous spacing between paragraphs.
  o Avoid using "all capitals" for continuous text. Important information, such as headings, names and telephone numbers, should be highlighted in a prominent position and in bold.

- **Paper**: Use good quality paper which does not look glossy or show print on the reverse side.

▪ **Electronic information**

USB sticks and any other media

Information in an electronic format, e.g. in accessible electronic documents on a USB stick, may be the preferred format for blind and partially sighted people with access to computers, who use speech synthesizers, Braille displays, large print displays and other innovations to access information. All electronic

information should be made available in an accessible text format allowing the text to be read on all kinds of word processing software. If you are providing information on a USB stick, the file should be in more than one format i.e. Word and Text to ensure that it can be read by a blind and partially sighted person. PDF files may be used provided they are created bearing in mind accessibility requirements. Dictionaries on CD-ROM should also be accessible[9].

Websites

The advent of the internet means that many blind and partially sighted people are now able to access information, in particular through on-line dictionaries, that was previously unavailable to them through speech or Braille access technology. However some methods of presenting information result in websites which are unreadable by blind and partially sighted people. While good quality speech synthesizers should be made available in all EU languages, all websites should follow the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) guidelines[10].

▪ **Alternative formats**

Large print

This means providing print in a larger font than 'standard'. A minimum of 16 point should be used for large print documents, but for some blind and partially sighted people up to 20 point text may be required.

As the majority of printed information is generated by word processors, it is possible to print off copies in the font size requested to meet individual needs.

It is recommended that large print be used as a matter of course for any documents aimed at older people who are more likely to have a sight problem.

Large print dictionaries should also be accessible.

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[9] Unfortunately, dictionary editors do not necessarily make their products accessible, which means that before buying one, a VI learner must find a retailer who will accept that he/she tests it.
[10] Available at http://www.w3.org/WAI/guid-tech.html

Braille

The numbers of blind and partially sighted people able to read Braille is small. A sizable proportion of VI people became blind or partial sighted late in life. It is more difficult for them to harness Braille as a practical means of accessing information. Nevertheless, this is a crucial medium. Braille is a method of reading by touch using a system of raised dots. There are dot combinations which correspond to letters of the alphabet, punctuation and common letter groups.

Almost any information can be put into Braille - from bus timetables to music. A Braille translation program and a Braille embosser are needed to produce Braille in-house. The Braille translation program converts the text into a format that can be outputted to a Braille embosser i.e. a Braille 'printer'. However, there are many external agencies that can produce Braille for you.

Spoken word audio

Spoken word audio is an effective means of communication. It is also ideal for people with learning difficulties, low literacy levels or those who may have problems with their hands.

Basic desktop recorders and microphones can be used for in-house production. However it is advisable to use an external transcription company for multiple copies, long documents, complex information and for professional quality with music and other effects.

Talking books and E-books

Talking books are books recorded on CDs. Many E-books are considered to be talking books. Talking books must be of commercial standard. It ought to be possible to use them both with equipment that is specially designed for blind and partially sighted people like DAISY players and also with standard equipment.

Transcription services

Many organisations find it more convenient and cost effective to use an external transcription company. Contact national organisations for further information about local transcription agencies for Braille and spoken word audio.

➢ Guidelines for the organisation of teaching

▪ On site learning vs. e-learning

Both on site learning and e-learning courses can be used for language learning.

As regards on-site learning, there are three options for language learning by VI adults: mainstream courses, special courses provided by institutions for VI persons, and individual tutoring. These all have specific advantages and drawbacks. The VI learner will choose the option that best suits his/her personal needs. A newly-blinded person may find it less challenging to attend a course where all the students have a visual impairment.

Classroom learning is suitable for students who have no problems working in groups and have the possibility of travelling. Materials for the lessons can be more varied and prepared in advance. Students are however bound by the timetable of the lessons.

Language schools currently offer a variety of combined studies – either internet only or partially over internet and partially with a live tutor on-site. However for the time being all such courses are highly graphical and thus completely unusable for disabled people.

E-learning is a new, quickly developing form of language learning. It is also a very comfortable form of study as no travel is involved and it is easier to manage time according to each student's specific needs.

The main problem of e-learning is that there are only a few e-learning systems with different levels of accessibility for blind and partially sighted persons, even with support from assistive technology. Also the learning content is often based more on graphical elements rather than on text. Therefore students must be technically

proficient in order to be able to describe the problems that can arise, and carefully choose the appropriate e-learning course. At present, the project partners are familiar with only one suitable e-learning language school including the on-line language courses developed in the framework of the project Eurochance II co-funded by the European Leonardo Da Vinci programme. Within this project an e-learning system and vocational language electronic textbooks for the English, German, Spanish, and Italian languages fully accessible to blind and partially sighted students were developed. The objective of the project was to enhance employability, employment opportunities and support the career development of people with visual impairment by providing courses developing and improving the language skills required in many professional situations. It also provides new employment opportunities since blind specialists should be able to serve as tutors for on-line language courses. The language courses provided are available in certain other native languages. At present they can be used by students speaking Czech, English, German, Italian, Norwegian, Slovak, Spanish, Hungarian, Polish, Portuguese, French, Romanian, and Turkish. The project website can be found at http://eurochance2.brailcom.org. The results of the project are available at http://www.langschool.eu.

- **Focusing on on-site learning**

Composition of classes

Mixed groups (sighted, blind and partially sighted students) are not an obstacle, provided that individual needs are met and that the teacher is aware of the difficulties and differences (preparation time, speed, mental representations, autonomy, and technical efficiency).

What is most important is to know one's students well and **differentiate** the tasks and approaches accordingly. For example, if the teacher wishes to show a map to the students, then embossed maps could be used for blind people. As regards partially sighted students, who use enlarged prints, the teacher should provide each one of these students with documents in the corresponding enlarged print size. Furthermore,

students in mixed groups can help each other out and be complementary (image description for example).

Size of classes

As shown in the national experiences reported below, the number of VI adults in a class should be established bearing in mind the need to meet the specific requirements of individual students. The number will of course vary depending on the educational setting (special or ordinary classroom).

In Slovakia, the current experience of teachers indicates it is more efficient to teach in small groups of students (either mixed or disabled-only) or in special courses dedicated to disabled people exclusively. This is propitious for an individual approach to each of the students. As an ideal there should not be more than five students in an ordinary class as more students means more situations to deal with during the lesson.

In the Czech Republic, the experience of 21 teachers, who have taught disabled adults indicates that such teachers often teach one-to-one or in very small groups, possibly mixed with non-disabled people, which indeed appears to be a very good idea.

The Classroom setting

Classroom layout: horseshoe seating is preferable as it makes it easier for VI students to move about and also to focus attention on the teacher's voice which has to be a static verbal reference whenever possible.

Material (including time for preparing and submitting material to the VI learner)

The **location** of the teaching and technical materials (e.g. dictionaries) must be clearly defined, easily accessible and remain unchanged, so that adult VI students can access them freely. Teachers who may someday welcome adult VI students must envisage time for adapting material (either in-house or by a dedicated institution).

Reading time

Braille readers and VI paper readers often need more time to be acquainted with unfamiliar content of written materials or hand-outs – more time and clues about their layout will be necessary and highly appreciated. Provide reading material in advance of the lesson.

Scheduling

Possible visual and mental tiredness (in front of the computer screen or in groups) may occur as some students must make extra efforts to concentrate. **Adapt length** of activities accordingly.

CONCLUSION

The Grundtvig Learning Partnership "Pedagogy and Language Learning for Blind and Partially Sighted Adults in Europe" enabled the partners - EBU, POB, SONS and UNSS - to network around the issue of the increased accessibility of VI adults to language learning.

The studies and exchanges carried out by the partners show that despite the provision of international conventions, the conditions for their national academic teaching organisations to take into account the specific needs of VI students are still not in place.

However guidelines to facilitate the access of VI adults to language learning do exist and are widely promoted by organisations dedicated to the social and professional inclusion of VI people.
These guidelines rely on the adoption of an operational strategy toward universities and teaching centres, which should consist of:

- Awareness-raising operations/training for language teachers: currently information about VI - or other disabilities - is not included in their curricula at all. Therefore they can feel helpless when confronted with a situation where they have to teach a VI learner;

- The use of assistive technologies and of accessible formats, which can make learning possible or easier for VI people, of which mainstream teaching teams and sites are unaware;

- The development of more on-site specialised training, including the use of alternative sensory techniques: methods like Realia call upon the senses of touch and hearing in order to convey conceptualisation and memorisation;

- The dissemination of existing e-learning materials and the design of new ones. E-learning is particularly promising, as demonstrated by the Leonardo Da Vinci "Eurochance" project, as it can help solve the mobility difficulties VI students often face.

ICTs currently offer a wide range of options in language teaching; there may also be other interesting ways of learning for VI people, like learning over Skype; one-to-one lessons partially over the internet, where students could solve grammatical exercises on their computers and send the results by email; pronunciation and conversation exercises; etc. However the development of e-learning material should be backed by individualised tutoring to avoid students feeling isolated in their learning process.

The partners have compared and analysed the current Cypriot, French, Czech and Slovak situations as regards language teaching/learning for adults, and pointed out good practices to disseminate and develop. The partners will capitalize on their common work as a basis to further develop and implement the innovative approaches and materials identified in the framework of the Grundtvig Learning Partnership "Pedagogy and Language Learning for Blind and Partially Sighted Adults in Europe" project.