

# Teaching Language to Children with Disabilities

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## **Introduction**

It is common knowledge that young children acquire language through a process of listening (oral communication) and speaking (spoken communication), and at a later stage, through reading and writing (response mode, usually seen as written communication). While milestones and processes are useful for persons interacting and working with children right from infancy to adult years, it is a challenging concept for those working with children who deviate from the perceptions of language development as per the milestones, and who may not therefore fit within the expected pattern of development.

These deviations are an interesting phenomenon when explored against the backdrop of the diversity that children bring to classrooms not only in India but the world over. Such diversity may be compared with the linguistic diversity that a bilingual or multilingual situation presents. According to Greenfield (2013), “A linguistically diverse student (LDS) is defined as a student who, at the very least, speaks a language other than English. Some LDS also possess literacy skills in their heritage languages.”

Language in the context of education becomes an issue if the mother tongue of the child is different from the medium of instruction in the school. External factors such as migration add to the complexity when the child is listening to a language that is different from the one she speaks, one that does not fit the “norm”. Language, thus, acquires an important position

in all systems of education as it is seen as the most effective and widely used communication mode.

The challenge for teachers is to be sensitive to these diversities, since it is also important to understand the use of language as a mode of functioning and navigating the complexities of today’s world. Learning a language as a subject or a discipline is but one aspect of learning; its utility however goes far beyond, as a medium of instruction for imparting knowledge and training in other subjects. Efficiency in the language of the medium of instruction however impacts the performance in all other curricular and co-curricular areas as well.

## **Language Learning for Children with Disabilities**

Let us look at language learning further to talk about some of the diversities that we face in Indian classrooms. Within a classroom, there may be first generation learners who need to acquire the mainstream language as they are transiting from a dialect or another language spoken at home. We may have children from disadvantaged communities, or different strata of society, or with disabilities, who may be first generation learners, and so on. Learners with disabilities have multiple challenges other than their disability, and these may have an impact on the development of their potential as an individual. Let us try to understand the relationship between the type of disability and

its implications for learning language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

A child with visual impairment may have difficulty in reading and writing when compared to a sighted child. However, the child will be able to read if the role of sight can be substituted with touch, and also write if he/she is taught Braille. Braille is a specially designed system of reading and writing using six raised dots that can be discerned through touch. Special Braille paper is used for the purpose and a stylus is used for writing in place of a pen or a pencil. Thus if the *material* of teaching/learning is altered, the visual disability can be compensated.

However, language teaching and learning is also about acquiring vocabulary, which in turn is associated with concept formation. The process of learning therefore involves the complexity of structure, vocabulary, and a degree of abstractness. This brings up another issue: is the process of concept formation the same for a blind or a low vision individual, as it is for a sighted person? The answer is that it is the same, as it involves experience, association, and internalization. However, students with visual impairment need a mediator to facilitate the process of conceptualization by aiding them in experiencing the process of learning a language, as experiencing through our senses events, states, action, etc. is the first step in the process of conceptualization.

### The Learner and the Learning Process

The entire process of learning for children in a school, as well as within a community, is centred on two significant aspects—opportunity and experience. As depicted in the following pie chart, sighted children have an edge over visually impaired (VI) children as their acquisition of knowledge is through experience and visual experience accounts for about 80% of our learning (Corpus et al., 2007). The learning experience for VI children can however be

made more comprehensive by providing them with information through other senses such as touch, hearing, and smell. Hence, for developing vocabulary and concepts for such children, teachers need to follow a multi-sensory approach.

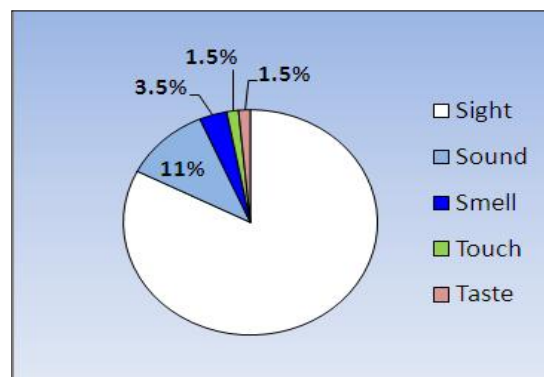


Figure 1. Pie chart on senses and perception from Corpus et al. (2007).

The process of learning is further affected by a number of conditions in a learning situation. An analysis of a complex learning activity reveals that it initially follows a simple stimulus - response schema, like the response of visualizing a ball when the stimulus of the word 'ball' is provided. The learner goes through the process of associating the word 'ball' with the object ball. However, this association is later internalized for any round object matching the salient features of a ball.

The conditions in the learning situation also impact the learning process. For example, in order to acquire the skill of problem-solving, the learning situation should provide a stimulus for recall, guidelines for channelizing thoughts, etc. If these are not created in the learning situation, the skills of problem-solving may not develop to the desired level. In the case of a VI child, since he/she would face an absence of stimuli at times, the motivation to learn may be absent. Suitable interventions can be used to stimulate

a VI child and enable him/her to learn nearly to the level of a sighted child. This can however happen only when the equivalent of a spontaneous or incidental learning for a sighted child is provided to the VI child through planned experiences involving senses other than sight.

Consider the example of vocabulary development in sighted children. Informal learning from signboards, posters and other stimuli from the environment reinforces formal learning. For a VI child, this experience can only be provided through a mediated experience. Thus a sighted child attains conceptual clarity by learning the attributes of an object in terms of its existence, having permanence, and differing from other objects. When she/he passes from a concrete to an abstract stage of learning, she/he learns to abstract common elements from several sensory experiences and acquires the skill of generalization. For VI learners, therefore, there is more reliance on data-driven, rather than conceptual processing (Pring and Painter, 2002; 25).

Sighted children do not have to be taught about every object that exists around them. They learn about them because of their multi-sensory capacities to approach them. VI children on the other hand, move from partially experiencing objects through tactile manipulation, auditory reception, and olfactory sensation to a less partial imagination, as opposed to direct, one-step visual perception. In order to know how a cow differs from a horse, they go through a step-by-step assimilation of attributes. Learning at an abstract level becomes challenging for them.

The following are some of the points that the teacher learner must be aware of when working with VI children:

- Concepts cannot be taught verbally, one must use a method based on an activity.
- In working with VI children, we must describe things in as much detail as possible.

- Complex tactile materials can be confusing for the child and are best avoided.
- It is important to remember to not leave things out from the description.
- Compensatory experience through additional verbal instruction must be provided.
- Compensatory experience in the form of appropriate learning material in tactile form must be provided.
- Compensatory experience in the form of three-dimensional aids must be provided.

In a classroom setting, the teacher should not use one particular approach for providing the learning experience, but may use a combination of the above approaches in an integrated manner, depending on the situation.

### **Learners with Other Disabilities**

Children with hearing impairment may have different levels of restrictions. Some may be born with this condition; others may acquire it at some point of time due to an illness, an accident or as a reaction to a medication, etc. A child who is born with hearing impairment will need intervention to develop language skills. Children up to the age of 5 years may be offered a cochlear implant under the ADIP (Assistance to Disabled Persons) scheme of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. However, even after a cochlear implant, the child will initially need to be trained to receive sounds and interpret them for meaningful language. Normally, these children start school only after developing language skills, as in the case of children with normal hearing. In the case of children who have not received an implant and therefore cannot speak because of an absence of auditory input, sign language may be used, as hearing aids do not work for all children. Those children who have become deaf after

developing their language skills will be able to speak, but will not be able to listen. As teachers, we need to be sensitive to all these varying conditions of hearing impairment.

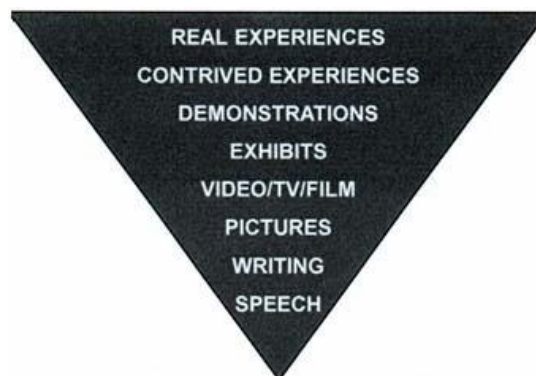
Hence, because of all these variations, language teaching requires a multisensory approach. The basic problem does not lie in written communication, but in listening and speaking. Most school boards do not insist on the three-language formula for these children. Although the NCERT curriculum recognizes a form of sign language, it is not followed in most cases. The Right To Education Act (2009) and its amendment in 2012, as well as the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* framework provide for inclusion of Children with Special Needs, identified on the basis of disabilities as defined by the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act (1995) as well as the National Trust Act (1992). Though learning disability as such is not defined by any of these acts, we do find references to children with disabilities. The disabilities that are currently covered in the act are: blindness and low vision, hearing and speech impairment, loco-motor disabilities, cerebral palsy, autism, mental retardation, mental illness, and multiple disabilities. These may be grouped under the following categories:

**Table 1**  
*Grouping Disabilities*

Intellectual	Mental Retardation, Mental Illness
Sensory	Visual Impairment including Blindness, Low Vision, Partial Vision and Albino, Hearing Impairment, Orthopedically Handicapped
Learning	Learning Disability
Multiple	Cerebral Palsy, Autism, Multiple Disabilities

However, these conditions create challenges only when we do not feel confident and competent to identify their unique needs in the learning process. As teachers, we need to

acquire competence and experience to be responsive to the learning needs of children with disabilities. We need to also understand how to select learning experiences (see Figure 2):



*Figure 2. 'Cone of experience', adapted from Dale (1954)*

The 'Cone of experience' is a pictorial representation that may be used to explain the interrelationships of various types of audio-visual media, in relation to their positions in the learning experience. In this inverted cone, the top level of the cone—real experiences—represents the experience derived from real life, whereas "speech", lying at the bottom level of the cone, deals only with the use of verbal symbols, and are the farthest removed from real life. Retention is highest when learning uses real experience for knowledge construction, rather than just talking about that knowledge.

## Conclusion

Dealing with children with disabilities in a mainstream classroom requires several skills, as outlined earlier, however, the process must start with an understanding of a basic issue—disability is not a problem and difference is the norm. Most educational approaches seem to respond to a disabled student from the perspective that emerges from an assumption of the normative, and they are bound to fail. Unless and until we cross this hurdle, we cannot hope to impart education to a student with disability in a meaningful way.

## References

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