

# Blind Teacher in Russia

## Tips and Experience

Tatiana Belova

Russian State Specialized Arts Academy

Moscow, Russia

e-mail: beltatiana@lenta.ru

**Abstract**—The following article describes three main aspects blind foreign language teachers encounter in their work: the right perception of blindness, the appropriate adaptive technology and the effective classroom management. The article is based on my personal experience and observations. It answers the questions I have been frequently asked since the first year of my work as an Italian language teacher. The article is addressed not only to perspective and working blind teachers and their sighted colleagues but also to all the people interested in the subject. Although teaching foreign languages may sometimes be challenging for visually impaired people, I strongly believe that with dedication and creativity it is possible to do it successfully.

**Keywords**—*Visually impaired; foreign language teaching; adaptive technologies; perception of blindness; blind culture; classroom management strategies; rapport*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Being a successful blind teacher starts when a blind person decides to become a teacher. The most difficult point for many Russian blind people is to become comfortable with their visual impairment and develop a positive attitude towards it. I have been teaching Italian language for the past 10 years. During my lessons I discuss not only the words and grammar of Italian language, I show students the similarities and differences between our languages and cultures. But most of my students, who are not blind themselves, often learn another important lesson — they learn to interact with a blind person. I always wanted my students to see that disabled people are just like anyone else in the world. In my opinion, that is one of the most important social roles a blind teacher can play. The purpose of this article is to explain three main aspects important for any blind teacher: 1. the perception of blindness; 2. technical aspects of teaching; 3. classroom management strategies. The article is addressed not only to blind professionals, interested in different teaching strategies based on my personal experience, but also to sighted colleagues who want to know more about the main techniques a blind teacher can apply.

### II. THE PERCEPTION OF BLINDNESS

Although technical aspects of teaching and classroom management strategies are almost the same for blind teachers in Russia and in other European countries, the perception of blindness remains slightly different for us.

Does blindness have its own culture? The only answer for many Russian blind and sighted people is "no". In Russia visual impairment is usually considered as a grave disability and not just as a characteristic. Even the expression "people with special needs" is translated into Russian as "people with limited abilities", which characterizes the common public attitude towards the subject. Even the majority of blind people consider them disabled and not just different. There are several common false prejudices concerning visually impaired individuals, such as "blind people should work only with blind and marry members of their society", "blind are usually poor", "blind should work in special organizations or enterprises", "the equipment of a special working place is too expensive", "blind people walk with dogs or with assistants", "blind people cannot read and use only talking books", "blind people have very good sense of smell, taste, touch and hearing" etc. People that communicate with visually impaired individuals often avoid words like "see", "look", "watch", "view", and get embarrassed when they accidentally use them. People usually try to remember some "politically correct" terms, such as "visually impaired", "sight challenged", "people with visual impairment", "people with vision loss" instead of saying just "blind". But often even blind people consider blindness as a disability and get offended when they hear the word "blind", especially as it sounds in Russian "слепой". Some of my friends confessed that when they speak foreign languages, terms like "blind" (English) or "blind" (German) sound okay, meanwhile the words "слепој" / "слепая" / "слепые" sound offensive. I strongly believe that the adequate perception of blindness is very important, especially for people employed in the field of education. It helps a blind teacher feel confident and assertive.

Unfortunately, the aspect of blind culture is still poorly developed in our country and it took me years to understand it and to get an adequate perception of blindness. I personally got it mostly through communication with my foreign colleagues, with the help of special seminars held in Germany and Italy dedicated to the aspects of visual impairment. Here are some tips based on my personal experience and observations. These tips may help other blind teachers to feel more confident, to develop the right perception of the visual impairment and to understand that blindness is not a grave disability but is just a particular characteristic:

#### *A. Positive and realistic attitude to blindness*

I usually try to be positive and realistic with students in regards to my visual impairment and disability. I start on the first day of work and when I meet my students for the first time, I explain them that I have been blind since the early childhood but nevertheless I have been teaching successfully for more than ten years in various groups of students. I explain it in a simple, honest and straightforward manner. Then, I explain the main classroom rules and how I'm going to perform various classroom tasks. Then I answer questions if they have them.

#### *B. Questions and help*

When I work with adults, I sometimes encourage them to ask questions about my blindness at any time. I remain realistic, positive and honest when I answer them. Very often students offer help. There's no need to refuse it. Helping the blind teacher can be a positive experience for sighted students regardless of their age or profession.

#### *C. Changing the attitude towards blindness.*

I try to think of myself just as an ordinary person, not as a person from a different society. It helps to develop a positive attitude towards the visual impairment and, as a consequence, to feel confident and assertive. I have learned to see blindness as a characteristic rather than a problem to be solved. But for many people in Russia it takes much time to realize it. People are not well prepared for the changes and often remain worried about their disability.

#### *D. Communication with blind colleagues from all over the world.*

When I started teaching, I was constantly searching for other blind colleagues from different countries who work in the field of education. At this point, my knowledge of foreign languages helped me a lot. I have been using foreign language to communicate via Internet and mailing lists with foreign teachers. In such cases special mailing lists designed for people with similar interests, problems or needs may be considered a very useful tool. I know some Italian and English mailing lists designed for blind teachers and educators. In these mailing lists a young teacher or any other person interested in this field may ask questions and get useful advice. Very often the experience of my foreign blind colleagues helps me to overcome current problems.

#### *E. Communication and interpersonal skills.*

I used to develop interpersonal skills in order to relate to students, parents or staff members in a positive manner. That helped me in my job, especially when I worked at school with groups of teenagers. Parents were often worried about my blindness and asked me lots of questions and I had to answer them in a polite, quiet and realistic manner.

#### *F. Positive experience.*

I always remember that I may be the first and the only blind person my students meet. Therefore, I do everything to make this experience a positive one.

To conclude, I would say that a blind student teacher must have a good knowledge of the subject, but equally important is mastery of the skills of blindness.

### III. TECHNICAL ASPECTS

The next important point of being a successful blind teacher is to master basic technical competencies and skills which enable us to work independently in the class. Very often, due to economic reasons, blind teachers in Russia work without sighted assistant. Therefore, it is important for us to develop certain practical skills, for example, blind teachers must be able to use a computer and the appropriate adaptive technologies.

#### *A. Braille.*

I have to write a lot of things in Braille, which I learned early at school. For most of us who do not see or do not see very well, Braille skills are essential. I print Braille materials for blind students with the help of the special Braille embosser, I write lesson plans for myself in Braille. Sometimes I use combined worksheets where the information is written in normal print or large print and in Braille. Usually, sighted students love such worksheets because they feel that they can work equally with visually impaired peers. Sometimes, it is worth making combined grammar schemes, where the information is presented in normal print or in large print and in Braille.

#### *B. Computer skills and adaptive technologies.*

I strongly believe that blind teachers can not work without using computers, talking screen readers and scanners. I use my computer to design worksheets for my students, to store necessary materials, to communicate via E-mail or Skype with my students or colleagues from all over the world, to get resources on the net, to print the materials, booklets and handouts. For reading print materials I use my computer and scanner. I have a flatbed scanner connected to my computer. It scans books or text pages, recognizes letters and numbers and converts them either into Braille or into text. Then I can listen to this information with the help of the talking screen-reading program "Jaws for windows", which is installed on my personal computer. The program exists in many languages including Russian. The program can read information, which appears on the screen. It is possible to use another screen-reading program "NVDA". There are many good Russian language synthesizers developed for this screen-reader. To edit the Braille I use the Braille display. I also use a digital recorder to record the instant messages or the information I'll need later on.

#### *C. Working with texts.*

There is a common prejudice in Russia that a blind teacher never works with texts and uses only audio recordings. The worse thing happens, when sighted teachers think that blind students don't need to read. Of course, it's not true, especially when it comes to foreign language teaching and learning. I always work with texts and it is just simple for blind teachers as for sighted colleagues. I'm strongly convinced that every student regardless of his/her disability should read and, possibly, write, even in Braille. If

a student doesn't read, the perception of foreign language texts is corrupted. It is impossible to learn languages only using sound. Instead of the visual memory, blind students use tactile memory, which is very strong. Although blind students can not see and memorize pictures, they can and must read texts equally with their sighted peers. Every blind or sighted teacher should prepare materials in normal print as well as in Braille. It's an essential point of foreign language teaching to students with visual impairment. Otherwise blind students may not only get false perception of the language but also feel discriminated. I transcribe every learning material in Braille not only for my teaching needs, but also for blind individuals, who can read Braille, if I have them in my class.

#### *D. Using the blackboard.*

I don't write on the blackboard but I sometimes use it for different activities. For example, I can assign a task for group work and ask one student to write the results. The second group checks the results. I give a handout with keys if needed. When students write on the board, it engages them in their learning process. When a student needs help with pronunciation, I instruct that student to spell the word rather than point. Alternative strategies: 1. Instead of the blackboard it is possible to use posters or handouts. It is a great tool because they can be independently prepared in advance, used over and over again, and put together with a Braille copy of the information, which appears on them. 2. Sometimes, when I need to have something written on the blackboard, I ask a reliable student to be my assistant and dictate the information that I need to be written. 3. Another strategy is to use a laptop. It usually works in rather small groups. Using my laptop computer I can show information on the screen. MS Power Point provides an additional option for presenting visual material to a class. 4. Sometimes it is possible to use photos and to put a little Braille label on it in order to identify them. I like to work with photos in mixed groups, where I have blind and sighted peers. There's a common prejudice that blind students can be offended when it comes to using pictures. On the contrary, I noticed that activities with photos may be very fun and relaxing. For example, sighted students describe the photos, while blind peers ask questions to understand the description. It means that the description should be very clear. I prepare in advance a Braille file with the description of all pictures I use in my class. 5. Booklets. I usually have booklets designed for my students and use them over and over again in various groups. In booklets the information is presented in a clear and comprehensive way. Booklets include explanations, tables, examples, texts, dialogues, vocabulary and exercises. They can be printed in normal and large print as well as in Braille according to the needs of students. The aim of booklets is to organize and explain the material and to present a structural scheme of the entire course or its part.

#### *E. Written assignments.*

I use several strategies to work with written assignments. 1. Using a multiple choice or true/false question test helps to check the results in a quick and easy way. 2. I often ask students to read their essays and compositions on tape in addition to turning in the print copy. 3. Sometimes I allow

students to correct each other's assignments or correct them in small groups and then compare the results. 4. It is possible to assign a grade on the basis of how students answer selected questions from the assignment orally, and occasionally, collect and grade certain assignments without announcing it in advance and then ask a sighted reader to check them. 5. Recently, a new form of assignments has become more and more popular among the students. I often use online tests with clear and easy testing system. Online tests are good not only for sighted students but also for students with visual impairment. Most of my students, especially young ones, like online tests and do them without cheating. The online system is a safe and easy to use tool. Some of my students like getting extra tasks via E-mail. That's one of the best means of working with assignments. By using these strategies, all the work gets done and the students are evaluated in a fair manner.

#### *F. Raising hands.*

I have been often asked how I handle the issue of sighted students raising their hands in class. The answer is simple. As a student raises a hand the student speaks his or her name, then I can ask the student to respond.

#### *G. Special materials.*

It's true that in Russia we often lack the necessary Braille materials, especially in languages different from English or German. Moreover, it's not easy to acquire teaching and learning materials in Braille. Therefore, I have to transcribe the materials in Braille using a special Braille embosser. In this way I can produce the books I need.

#### *H. Mobility.*

People are often interested in how a blind person gets to and from work. The situation is just the same as in many other countries. It depends on the person. Some people go with sighted partners, others use the long white cane and others prefer to walk with the dog. Although in a huge city like Moscow it seems impossible to walk with the dog on long distances. Some blind individuals prefer to take a taxi. I usually explain that it is simply the blind teacher's responsibility to get anywhere.

#### *I. Distance learning.*

This form of education is becoming more and more popular in our country not only with blind, but also with sighted people, especially when it comes to learning foreign languages. There's no need to spend time on getting to the place that may be far from home. A student may choose a teacher and arrange a trial lesson. Finally, the price is often lower, but the quality remains high enough. I often use this form of teaching and tutoring. I personally prefer to learn new foreign languages online. For tutoring it is better to use Skype and E-mail. For large groups (10-15 students) it is possible to use voice chat systems called Ventrilo or Teamtalk. It's basically voice chat programs which were made for gamers to communicate but you can use them for any reason you want to, for example, to teach foreign languages. In this chat room people speak rather than type. I find these programs very useful for group conversations. This form of distance learning is really good for students

living in different parts of Russia. As I mentioned before, I often use online tests and E-mail communication.

To conclude, I would say that the blind student teacher, regardless of the country he or she lives, must be literate in Braille, quick with keyboard skills, and experienced in the use of adaptive techniques and classroom strategies.

#### IV. CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Classroom management strategies are essential, especially for a blind teacher. The blind student teacher must be assertive. The teacher manages everything in the educational process.

##### A. Students with different needs

These days a teacher must have the skills to deal with students with a variety of unique needs, such as professional or personal needs. I also mean working with students with disabilities. The talent of dealing with individual needs is developed by working with a variety of students in different settings. I mostly like inclusive classes where one or two blind students are included in the group of sighted peers. Students may learn a lot from each other and become more tolerant in and out of the class [1].

##### B. Listening skills

Careful listening is a necessary skill for any foreign language teacher. One of the hardest techniques for new teachers to learn is to hold the entire class in their attention. In this case, blind teachers are more experienced and can follow several simultaneous conversations and correct mistakes. Blind people are used to rely on sounds and hearing. This skill is not easy to acquire and needs constant practice and attention.

##### C. Beforehand planning

For me, it is also very important to be organized. The lesson must be carefully planned in advance. When I enter the classroom, I must have prepared all the necessary materials in advance and know where they are. I check beforehand all the chairs and desks in the room because it is important to know where every student sits. In groups of teenagers it is better to assign a definite place to every student. It helps to prevent cheating or other unusual situations that may happen in the classroom. Sometimes students sit around the table, so they can see each other's faces. Grouping desks offers several benefits including encouraging cooperative learning, building a sense of class community and making the best use of the space.

##### D. The first day of teaching

For me, the first day of student teaching is very important. I must feel at home in the classroom. That means a lot of preparation beforehand. I usually make a very careful lesson plan for the first day. It is important to start in control and to establish the atmosphere of trust and confidence in the class from the first day of teaching. I know that it is very hard to recover from a poor start later on and to change the first impression.

##### E. The classroom climate

The environment of my classroom is safe and welcoming, and it includes a lot of humor, role-plays and conversation. My students notice that I do several things in a slightly different way than their other teachers do because of my blindness, but it never stopped them from being motivated. The classroom environment is very important not only for blind but also for sighted teachers, it means building the atmosphere of trust and mutual respect.

##### F. Peer support

Peer support is a very important point for my lessons. I give much time for peer interaction because I realize that alone I cannot teach everything my students should know. They need practical experience with their peers to learn [2]. Very often my students interact with one or more peers. Several peers may be assigned as teacher's assistants. They function as role models or real assistants in my classroom. Teacher assistants work with other students, make dialogues or do the exercises, ask questions based on the written text. Sometimes they write on the blackboard, check the answers and act as judges. I know that I won't be with my students forever, but they will always have peers. Teaching my students to interact with each other is a top priority in my classroom. To me, the process of learning is not just sitting at a desk, copying from the blackboard or writing the lecture. It's feeling safe and learning to work together with other peers. It means learning things in several different ways and applying them in practice in various situations.

##### G. Special education

Blind teachers have their limitations. But even sighted teachers have limitations as well in their ways of experiencing the world, particularly when it comes to working with blind students. Most of sighted teachers are little aware of this limitations, but blind students often notice them. I often hear complaints like: "we don't understand what a teacher writes on the board", "we don't have Braille materials", "we have to do everything only by hearing"; or even worse: "the teacher ignores us", "the teacher makes us speak only with blind partner". All this things are essential and sighted professionals working with blind students should be well aware of them. Thus, I admit that sometimes it is easier for a blind teacher to work with sighted students, than it is for a sighted teacher to work with blind students. In both cases special education is required. But in most cases blind teachers have this education. It is an essential point for their work. On the contrary, not all the sighted teachers attend special courses for working with disabled students. Blind students are the minority and sighted specialists consider it not so important for them in their career. I think that special education should be an integral part of the teaching not only for blind educators but also for their sighted colleagues.

##### H. Building the rapport

Some teachers regardless of their disability lack rapport with their students. The term "rapport" is defined in the Random House Dictionary as "an especially harmonious or sympathetic connection" [1]. Creating rapport is very important for any teaching and learning situation. It means

building emotional connections between a teacher and a student and creating a particular atmosphere of trust, mutual respect, cooperation and comfort. I strongly believe that rapport building helps blind teachers to be more successful and effective. It creates a particular class climate, which has a positive influence on both: students and teachers. From the first day of the course, I try to create a warm and friendly atmosphere in the classroom. Then I continue to bring positive emotions on and on, regardless of the problems that may arise during the term.

The psychologist Joseph Lowman noted in this book [2, 98] that teachers must minimize negative emotions, such as anxiety or anger, and must create positive feelings such as trust and mutual support. This approach will help students to be motivated in learning the subject. Students think of their teacher (even if he or she is blind) in highly positive ways. The positive effects of rapport influence not only students but teachers as well. Most teachers enjoy classes more when they have good personal relationships with their students, and this feeling of satisfaction has a positive effect on the quality of their teaching.

## V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, I would say that blind teachers in Russia face almost the same problems as their foreign colleagues do. But the perception of blindness and the attitude towards it still remains slightly different for us. We don't have special education for people who want to become teachers; we still don't have professional alliances and appropriate support from government or local organizations. Finally, there are not so many blind teachers in Moscow and in the whole Russia, especially totally blind ones. Fortunately, at present we may notice some changes in views and beliefs concerning people with disabilities in our society. I mean not only sighted people but also blind individuals. Young graduates should not be afraid to become teachers. It is true that being blind makes the teaching more challenging, but with creativity, dedication and imagination it is possible to overcome all the current difficulties and become a confident and successful professional teacher.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Badil V.A., Lyubimov M.L. Inclusive classrooms as a variant of inclusive education // *National Psychological Journal*, 2(8), 2012. – p. 132-135.
- [2] Boot t., Ainscow m. Index for Inclusion: developing learning and participation in schools. – Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education; 3rd Revised edition, 2011. – 192 p.
- [3] Broome C. Insight without sight. // *CBM. V. 25: Psychology of blindness*. – AEBC, 2007. – p. 31-36.
- [4] Inclusive education : News digest #1. – m.: ROOI Perspektiva, 2010. – 6 p.
- [5] Lowman, J. Mastering the techniques of teaching. - Jossey-Bass, 1998. – 368 p.
- [6] The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 2nd Edition. – The Random House, 1987. – 2478 p.