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**Measures for inclusion: coping with the challenge of visual impairment and blindness in mainstream university undergraduate level language learning.**

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## **Abstract**

This paper follows on from previous research (Orsini-Jones *et. al.* 2005) and reports on the experience of three students, two visually impaired and one blind, reading languages at Coventry University, on the adjustments made to meet their needs and on the challenges encountered on their learning journey both from their point of view and from the point of view of the staff involved. It will focus on the three students' experience of a skills module in particular and the languages course in general and on the challenges met in each of their years of study. It will conclude by evaluating these students' language learning journey at Coventry University, report on their feedback on their experience and on whether or not they feel that staff have successfully catered for their individual needs. It is argued here, as in the previous related work (Orsini-Jones, *et. al.* 2005:146) that 'there still exists some tension between the reasonable anticipatory adjustments that lecturers can put in place and the necessary *ad hoc* ones that will be needed for a disabled student with very specific needs'.

**Key words: Learning, Languages, Accessibility, Visually impaired, Blind, Adjustments**

## **Introduction**

Coventry University has a strong track record in providing guidelines for staff on how to support disabled students (e.g. Cowork 2001a and Cowork 2001b) and there are many institutional 'agents' who provide advice on how to cater for their needs, such as experts from the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE, formerly Centre for Higher Education Development – CHED) and the Disability Office. It is furthermore possible to make teaching materials accessible in the Library, in the Teaching and Learning Support Unit. Each Faculty has a Learning Support Coordinator who liaises with the disability office and there is an electronic system in place that enables staff to verify at the click of a button if there are any students who have declared a disability at the application stage (the SOLAR system).

Despite this strong infrastructure, which is compliant with current UK legislation (DDAIV 1995), but also goes beyond it, it has proven challenging for languages staff to cater for the needs of the visually impaired and blind students who have registered for the languages degree course between academic years 2003-2004 and 2004-2005. Two of these students have a serious visual impairment and one is totally blind from birth. The evidence collected both via quantitative (students' results) and qualitative data (focus group interviews with students, semi-structured interviews with staff and students and written feedback in the students' European Language Portfolio and in electronic discussion postings) on the one hand corroborated some of the results of the first research carried out about one of these students (Orsini-Jones *et. al.* 2005), but on the other hand it threw new

light on the way the individual needs of partially sighted or blind students reading languages should be catered for, with particular reference to specific language tasks, such as translation and reading comprehensions.

Like in the first work which has been referred to, 'disabled students' and 'students with disabilities' will be used interchangeably in this paper as from the guidelines contained in the *Quality Assurance Agency Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education. Section 3: Students with disabilities* (1999:1). The author is aware of the fact the social model recommends 'disabled students' (Gravestock *et. al.* 2005:5-7). Also, as also suggested in Gravestock *et al* (2005:7-9), 'visual impaired' will not be used here as synonym for 'blind'.

## **1. Methodology**

This paper aimed at finding whether a robust local infrastructure supporting the experience of disabled students would be sufficient to cater for the needs of visually impaired and blind students reading languages.

A cycle of curriculum action research was actioned with instrumental case studies and triangulation (Stake 2005:445; McKernan 1992). Informed consent to take part in the research was sought from each participant. Although the research focused on the three case studies (two visually impaired students and one blind student) the data relating to all undergraduates studying languages in

year 1 who took part either actively (focus group and individual semi-structured interviews evaluating the students' learning experience on the modules taken by the students with disability) or less actively (the students' results, reflective logs and contributions to the discussion forums in the Virtual Learning Environment WebCT) were also taken into account, as well as the transcripts of the interviews carried out with staff between 2004-2006.

Sarah (not her real name) is one of the two visually impaired participants whose learning experience was evaluated for this study. She is a mature student, partially sighted, aged 37, who had become visually impaired following brain damage suffered in a motorcycle accident at the age of 29. She took part in the focus group interviews in 2003-2004 (see further details below), in her first year of studies, and was also interviewed individually in October 2006, after her return from the year abroad. She was originally studying part-time, but became a full-time student in her second year of studies, 2004-2005, majoring in Spanish (Single Honours Spanish). Her native language is English. Her previous educational experience, which took place prior to her motorcycle accident, had been mainstream. Her proficiency level in Spanish was higher intermediate prior to enrolment at university (she was Post-A level in her first year, having obtained a 'C' grade in both French and Spanish).

Maria (not her real name), the second student, is also visually impaired, but from birth. Her eyes water continuously and this makes it difficult for her to read for

long periods and/or to use a PC without taking breaks. She is bilingual English/Spanish, was 20 years of age at the time of her interview and studying for a Joint Honours Degree in Spanish and Tourism. She was interviewed individually. Her previous educational experience had been mainstream, but in a private college in Spain. She also had Italian at intermediate level, but was not studying it at University.

The third student, Harry (not his real name) was 20 years of age at the time of his first interviews in year one. He is totally blind from birth. Harry initially registered to study on a Joint French and German Honours Degree, reading Spanish as a minor option, but then changed to a French Single Honours degree in his second year of studies, keeping both German and Spanish as 'minor' options. He took part in the focus group interviews in academic year 2004-2005 and was also interviewed individually on separate occasions in 2004-2005 and 2005-2006. His previous educational experience was mixed (he attended both a specialist school for the blind and a mainstream college). His proficiency in French was at higher intermediate level ('A' level French grade 'C'). He also had an 'AS' level German and was a beginner in Spanish.

In 2004-2005 four members of staff (1 Spanish, 2 French and 1 German) and a helper (French native speaker) were interviewed with reference to their support for the learning experience of the totally blind student. This was repeated with eight members of staff in 2005-2006 (2 Spanish, 3 French, 1 German, 2

English/Linguistics) and a helper (another French native speaker). The interviews also included questions on the comparison between the experience of teaching a totally blind student and partially sighted students, as most members of staff were involved in teaching both the partially sighted students and the totally blind student. Members of staff from the disability office at Coventry University and from the staff at the Royal National College for the Blind in Hereford were also consulted on the issues encountered.

The group and individual interview recordings were transcribed into plain MS-DOS of ASCII text and loaded into the software *ATLAS.ti* (Muhr, 1997), a workbench suitable for the processing of qualitative data.

The data was analysed independently by a research assistant and by the main researcher to identify relevant themes. Both subsequently met and discussed the themes identified to agree on those that were more relevant and should become the object of further research and analysis.

## ***2. Learning how to learn languages: Academic and Professional Skills for Language Learning***

*Overall, study-skills instruction has been shown to improve academic performance, strategic knowledge, and affective responses among students with*



*learning problems across multiple academic domains (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000).*

*(Ahonen 2005:55)*

In the above quote, Timo Ahonen is referring in particular to the experience of pupils with special educational needs in schools. His article is part of a very comprehensive work produced by the European Commission *Special educational needs in Europe. The teaching & learning of languages. Teaching languages to learners with special needs* (2005) that offers a wealth of insights on how to cater for the needs of SEN students in mainstream educational settings.

As it is often the case, what works well for SEN students, is also known to be beneficial to the learning experience of non-SEN students (Waterfield and West, 2002; Gravestock, *et. al.* 2005). The case for study-skills teaching is evidenced in relevant literature (e.g. Papert, 1996; Cottrell, 2001 and 2003; Sontengs, 2001; Orsini-Jones, 2004), that confirms that engaging students, all students, in metacognition ('the art to learn how to learn'), is conducive to deep learning strategies. Furthermore, as already highlighted previously (Orsini-Jones and Jones, 2007:91), there are specific requirements that all languages courses in the UK HE sector must comply with :

in the United Kingdom Higher Education sector there is a requirement for each programme of studies to comply with quality assurance guidelines set for the sector by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). Each subject has therefore to comply with a 'Subject Benchmark Statement' document.

The document for Languages and Related Studies states, under the heading '4.2 Language related skills', that by the end of their course: Students of Languages and Related Studies (LRS) will have developed appropriate linguistic tools and metalanguage to describe and analyse the main features of the language(s) studied. They will thus be able to make effective use of language reference materials, such as grammars, standard and specialised dictionaries and corpora, to refine knowledge and understanding of register, nuances of meaning and language use. Students of LRS will be effective and self-aware independent language learners. (QAA, 2002:9)

*Module Academic and Professional Skills for Language Learning*, a research method and study skills course for linguists compulsory for all students reading languages at Coventry University between 2002-2006, was therefore designed to foster metacognition. As already illustrated in related literature (Orsini-Jones 2004; Orsini-Jones *et. al.* 2005; Orsini-Jones and Jones 2007), it is a reflective module, where students think about the way they learn both in generic and in language specific terms and transfer newly acquired skills and literacies to the other modules that they are studying.

The major assessed task for the module, a group grammar project, which weights 60% of the final module mark, was designed incorporating accessibility principles and to stimulate an awareness of accessibility issues amongst all

students. It was also created with constructionist principles in mind: students would produce their own 'grammar artifact', a website and linked reflective Power-Point presentation, which they would share for the duration of the academic year, as their grammar project would be uploaded onto the Virtual Learning Environment's shared content area. Displaying students' work in a shared area within a Virtual Learning Environment has proven to be a motivational factor in their engagement (Orsini-Jones and Davidson, 1999; Davidson and Orsini-Jones, 2002). The project was designed according to constructionist principles:

Constructionism suggests that learners are particularly likely to make new ideas when they are actively engaged in making some type of external artifact' – in the case of this study this consisted in a grammar project that included the construction of a website – 'which they can reflect upon and share with others. Thus, constructionism involves two intertwined types of construction: the construction of knowledge in the context of building personally meaningful artifacts (Kafai and Resnick, 1996:1)

Instructions were designed in compliance with the above mentioned European Commission report's recommendations (Orsini-Jones *et. al.* 147), insofar as the task involved:

1. Cooperative team teaching (two instructional designers/educational technologists, one linguist who was an expert in skills and ICT teaching and an expert in linguistics).
2. Cooperative learning: student had to work in groups - evidencing team work was one of the assessed requirement of the project.
3. Collaborative problem-solving: student would discuss issues encountered with peers and tutors both face-to-face and online.
4. Use of ICT as an 'extra line of support' to provide both virtual support peer-to-peer (to include the employment of an 'expert' student mentor from the previous year) and tutor to students and to provide accessible materials.
5. Highly structured teaching and learning plan provided at the beginning of the academic year with the opportunity to create assessment in alternative format clearly spelt out to students from the beginning of the academic year.

As part of the instructions for the grammar project, which were also posted on the Virtual Learning Environment in accessible format, students received a lecture on the importance of creating accessible materials both at university and in the world of work. Also, issues relating to disability were discussed in class. The accessibility-friendly instructions were created before staff knew that visually impaired and/or blind students would joint the course in academic years 2003-

2004 and 2004-2005, as advocated in the SEN literature (e.g.: Scott *et. al.*, 2003).

The use of the Virtual Learning Environment WebCT (Web Course Tools) was instrumental in the support of the students' reflective skills, as students were encouraged to make regular contributions to their dedicated group's discussion forums.

### **2.1 Reflections on the outcomes of the experience of implementing the ICT grammar project .**

The analysis of the data collected appears to hint at three different perceived outcomes for the two visually impaired students and the blind one who carried out the set task in group, even if some common themes can be identified.

Perceived is deliberately underlined, as each of the three students received a high mark for their group project (all mid-to-top 60s, 2.1 classification), but their beliefs about whether the grammar project had been an inclusive experience or not varied considerably.

Harry was delighted with the experience, new to him, to take part into an assessed group task. He could access the material on WebCT via his assistive software JAWS for Windows, which reads information on the screen of the user

using synthesised speech (regarding the issues encountered when adapting materials for Harry with JAWS please refer to Orsini-Jones *et. al.* 2005:149).

When interviewed, Harry did not seem to have been negatively affected by his inability to 'see' the project as it was being built in group during the class contact hours. He was happy to have had his helper explain what his peers were designing orally and to provide oral feedback on the choices to be made in the web design and content of the group project during class-time. He was then able to access the project from WebCT via Jaws with his special laptop in his Hall of Residence. He felt fully supported by the other members of his group and by his helpers.

Maria, on the other hand, wrote in her individual report where she reflected on her learning experience for the grammar project, that her experience had not been an inclusive one. In her view, she had been unable to fully contribute to her group discussions and website construction in front of a PC screen during the classroom workshops because of her visual impairment. She raised, for the first time in the above mentioned individual report, and well into the academic year, the issue of the lack of assistive screen enlargement software in the laboratory that was being used, e.g. 'Lunar'. Staff in languages were not aware that this software was available within the institution at the time of Maria's complaint. Also, it was puzzling that despite the sessions on disability delivered by her lecturers, Maria had not mentioned the issue before she finished the group project. She

had only mentioned the requirement to have her material enlarged to a font size of 18 or above, which lecturers had complied with. The episode highlighted to staff that sometimes things can go wrong despite their best efforts, particularly in view of the fact that Maria was in the same year group as Harry and was being taught on the same module. Following an individual interview with Maria it transpired that she had assumed that the disability office would communicate to the Faculty what was required for her, while the disability officers who saw her had told her that it was her duty to disclose her needs to staff, following her assessment with them. This type of misunderstanding happens regularly; the problem can probably be partially explained by the 'information overload' issue affecting visually impaired and blind students, which is well documented in relevant literature (e.g. Gravestock *et. al.*, 2005; Orsini-Jones *et. al.* 2005). Also, the communication process between the disability office and the faculty has proven to be a bit of a grey area over the years, as the issues of confidentiality and disclosure can negatively affect it. Although it was verified that the mishap had been caused by Maria's non-disclosure, the episode highlighted the need to repeat the relevant information to visually impaired students more than once and possibly the need for lecturers to be even more pro-active than they were already in investigating students' needs before an assessed task.

The third student, Sarah felt that the project had enhanced her confidence and, although she had difficulties with seeing the PC screen in class, she could access all the WebCT files and discussion postings thanks to assistive software

that she had installed at home (Zoomtext – a magnifier/reader similar to Lunar). The confidence boosting effect of the group project was important in Sarah's case, as she admitted that following her motorcycle accident, at the time of her enrolment:

I was at a point in my life where my confidence was so shattered and I didn't know whether I could do it or not. I thought about working as well but I thought if I worked I might be letting somebody else down whereas if I'm studying the only person I can let down is myself. And that's why I tried, you know, to do a degree and I'm very glad I've done it and it's put my confidence back up (individual interview, October 2006).

Although she found the group work on the grammar project a great confidence booster, Sarah admitted that she had mixed feelings about the computer work. This had to do mainly with her previous educational experience. Apart from word-processing, she had not used ICT at all when she took her 'A' levels before her accident. Although she found it difficult to begin with, like Harry, Sarah greatly valued the socio-collaborative aspects of group work and of the collaborative use of the Virtual Learning Environment.

Harry and Sarah integrated well with their peer group and, as previously mentioned, obtained high marks for their group project on grammar. Despite the issue that arose with Maria, the grammar project appeared to have been



successful in raising awareness amongst all students about the needs of disabled people in the period of its implementation (2002-2006). It was moreover beneficial for the team of staff teaching this module to discuss issues relating to disability at work and at university. This was made more poignant by the presence of various students with disabilities in the cohorts under study - there were not only Harry, Sarah and Maria, but also students with dyslexia, with mental health problems, with asthma and with mobility impairments.

The use of ICT proved to be beneficial for most staff and students and promoted a constructionist approach to the building of the grammar project (also see Orsini-Jones and Courtney, 2005 and Orsini-Jones and Jones, 2007 on this point), however the experience of creating the grammar project proved to be more inclusive for the blind student who had fully disclosed his disability and related needs, Harry, than the visually impaired ones who hadn't (Sarah and Maria).

Sarah also raised another issue. She stated that she felt at a disadvantage in comparison with Harry and Maria. This was because her visual impairment had been a consequence of an accident and she was 'new' to being partially sighted. For this reason she sometimes felt that students like Harry and Maria knew what would be best for them more than she did, as they had had their disability since birth, while she was new to studying as a visually impaired person:

When I first came here ... I didn't really know a) what was available and b) what my problem was. You know I knew I couldn't see as well as I could but I hadn't worked since I had my accident and I hadn't studied since I had my accident so I didn't really know what my problems were. But these people that have been blind since birth, or partially sighted since birth, have grown up in an environment that has taught them that things are available on the computer and so they know what's available whereas I didn't (individual interview, October 2006).

In this respect, Sarah's journey of discovery of her special needs is ongoing, more so, to a certain extent, than that of Harry or Maria (she was in her fourth and final year at the time of the individual interview in 2006). As her impairment was caused by brain damage in an accident which occurred in her late 20s, and not even doctors appeared to be clear on what would be best course of action for her, Sarah, her disability officer and her teachers have had to work out specific adjustments as the need occurred. Like Maria, Sarah was somewhat reticent too to fully disclose her disability – which is 'unseen', as there are no physical signs of it. Her words below took the interviewer, who had been one of her first year tutors, somewhat by surprise and highlighted to the tutor both Sarah's anxieties and her very specific needs. She wanted to be like the other students, was already feeling 'different' from her peers because of her status as a mature student and did not want to draw any further attention to herself:

I don't know about a lot of people with visual impairment but mine is quite a difficult one in that I can sometimes see fairly small but it's not always where I think it is and because of that making it bigger doesn't always help and it can be that if the font is too big, as I scan from word to word, I miss out complete words. And it's really difficult to explain to anybody but also I'm a bit stupid really because I don't like to make a fuss (individual interview, October 2006).

Also, it appeared that Sarah had not benefited from a full and accurate 'low vision' assessment for educational purposes, with diagnostic activities aimed at identifying specific needs, such as the ones illustrated by Tanni Anthony (2000:64-72) including for example a visual-cognitive skills test. She said that all she had received after her accident was a magnifying glass, which she had not found particularly useful.

### **3. Problematic issues: perspectives from staff**

As already mentioned in the previous related work (Orsini-Jones *et. al*, 2005), despite the fact that staff in languages had attended many training sessions on how to make adjustments for a variety of disability issues and had read relevant literature (e.g. Curriculum Close Up Issue 8), the reality of teaching languages to visually impaired and blind students presented many challenges, particularly for the part-time members of staff who were teaching these students. It is undeniable that adjusting materials for language learning can be time consuming. Also, some disabled students refuse the human resources support offered by the

disability office (like a helper who could photocopy/enlarge material) because they don't want to 'stand out' as disabled students. This however can then create extra work for the lecturers who teach them, who don't receive any extra support themselves.

The analysis of the transcripts of the interviews with the staff who taught Sarah, Maria, and Harry in particular, as he was the first ever blind student on the Modern Language Degree at Coventry University, illustrated the amount of extra work which was involved in adjusting the following:

1. The language-specific assessment tasks – whether in class tests/exams or coursework done at home;
2. The material for class delivery;
3. The content for a session;
4. The way in which the session was delivered - for example the need to provide 'tactile' examples rather than visual ones for Harry –
5. The classroom environment to administer each assessed task – for example having a special laptop port opened for Harry's laptop in the computer lab for an online test for the languages skills module and having Lunar installed for Maria in the same lab to enable her to take both the languages skills and the Spanish grammar online tests.

The interview extract below shows some language-specific issues a lecturer encountered while teaching Harry in his second year of studies:

Interviewee: In terms of grammar materials sometime I had to re-edit stuff. If I got it from the web he found it difficult to actually read it. If I used grammar material from various online resources, I would normally just use those with students, but because of the formatting that created problems for him so there was a certain amount of extra work in trying to sort out the delivery.

Interviewer: So you cut and pasted into Word what you found on the web and emailed it to him?

Interviewee: Yes I did that, but even then, if you have boxes ...that's a problem so it really means re-writing everything which was a bit of a problem. I didn't always manage that. I sometimes sent him stuff which I'd edited and he said that it was useful to a degree, but I think I'd have had to have completely re-written some material (staff interview, July 2006).

Most lecturers agreed that the discipline required for the advance preparation of the teaching materials for SEN students also benefited the other students, however some lecturers felt a bit 'boxed in', as they could not 'stray' from the path of the pre-prepared notes. The Coventry University languages degree courses are mainly based on current affairs and contemporary issues. Lecturers teaching contemporary France found that they could not any longer present to the class the latest news while they were 'hot from the press', as material needed

to be adapted for the blind student before its delivery and there was not enough support provided for the lecturers to make the necessary adjustments in time for their sessions. Some stated that they had found this limiting. Lecturers who, on the other hand, did not teach current affairs, could prepare everything in advance and did not feel that the need to adjust material was limiting for them, as can be seen in the quote below:

I planned way ahead because in June last year I knew that he was going to be in the double (module) and I use a book, a textbook, in the double, and planned what part of that book to use in each class. And I asked the helper to type it in such a way that he could read it and he had it session by session right at the beginning of the course. So I suppose my colleague is right, it does mean that you have to stick to what you have decided to do (...). And when I had handouts, most of them were typed by me anyway so I could send them ahead of time to him. But there were a few articles that he could not get because I didn't have a scanner, but the helper read them to him (staff interview, July 2006).

Some lecturers also confessed to 'feeling inadequate' to teach a blind student, as they would have liked to know Braille, but didn't, and felt that they didn't have the time to learn it. The lack of Braille knowledge amongst staff also presented them with the issue of quality control of the academic standards of the assessment texts for Harry. The issue related mainly to proofreading, as staff had to take Harry's word that the reading comprehension texts, translations, etc. had been Brailled correctly.

An area of staff discontent was the fact that the helpers originally provided by the disability office were not subject specific. It is very difficult to operate as a note-taker in a French, Spanish or German class if you are not a linguist. Maria did not need a helper, being nearly bilingual. Sarah was allocated one, but decided that they were of no use to her because they did not have Spanish: 'Because they didn't know the subject and it was obvious from what they'd written down that they didn't know the subject' (individual interview October 2006). Unfortunately, she did not report this to either the disability office nor her tutors until near the end of her degree course. If she had done so, a language-specific helper could have been provided, as was the case for Harry. It was in fact the staff in languages who proposed the use of subject-specific helpers for Harry and carried out the selection of suitable candidates by interviewing students on Socrates exchanges from France.

As the needs of visually impaired and blind students reading languages are quite specific, it soon became apparent that staff in languages and the SEN students themselves knew more about support for SEN languages students than the disability office. These are the words of one of the lecturers:

The Disability Office, you know, they are all right on the admin side, paying, you know, but I think that they didn't seem to me to have a lot of

additional expertise to help us. (They just) say, basically, fine 'there's the money, get on with it' and that was it (staff interview, July 2006).

A further problematic issue that caused frustration amongst the tutors was that of obtaining languages textbooks in accessible format. Some publishers are very helpful and will provide an electronic copy of the language book required if one is not already held at the library of the Royal National College for the Blind (RNC) in Hereford. Others will not even reply to emails and some books, particularly foreign ones, might be out of print. The solution is for the institution to make a copy of the textbook in accessible format. This is acceptable according to copyright laws applied at Coventry University as long as:

1. The institution has purchased at least a copy of the textbook.
2. The accessible copy will be for the sole use of the visually impaired/blind student.

There is evidence that publishers are not as proactive as they could be in providing accessible textbooks and dictionaries for visually impaired and blind students - please refer to RNC's and NIMAS' websites for further information on this. Finding advanced level dictionaries in accessible format can be particularly problematic, as they are only available in e-format which is not normally allowed in examinations. Sarah was going to be the first 'test case' on this issue in the 2006-2007 examination period.



In fact, one of the major time-consuming organisational issue for staff teaching Maria, Harry and Sarah, was that of the special arrangements to put in place for both in-class tests and final year examinations. The assessment needs of each of the three students discussed here had to be negotiated individually, and an 'assessment plan' was put in place for each of them. In the case of the blind student a 'mock' exam/test was also always administered before the real one, to test the Braille system. This was done by asking the helper to read the relevant text in French while Harry was checking its transcription in Braille to see if they matched.

Information overload problems were reported by each of the three students and related mainly to essay writing, end-of-year examinations, translation assessment tasks in class and/or during the examination and reading articles in class. Breaks during assessed tasks were offered to each of them, but it is interesting to note that initially Harry did not want to take any, because he always insisted that he wanted to be treated like the other students. He eventually agreed that it was in his best interest to do so. Similarly, in her individual interview, Sarah kept repeating that she 'did not want to make a fuss' about her needs as this made her uncomfortable and also made her SEN stand out, embarrassing her in front of the other students. She stated however that she was pleased that she had found out that she could take breaks during an

examination, as she knew that the quality of her vision deteriorated after spending over an hour on a written text.

The theme of 'being treated like an equal' has been a recurrent one in the interviews with the three students, with Harry in particular (see also Orsini-Jones *et.al.* 2005:152 on this point). There appears to be a tension for each of these students between their will to be treated like every other student and the fact that they have SEN. There were quite a few instances in which languages staff felt that the students could have benefited from extra help from their language specific helpers, but such offers were turned down by the student concerned. Staff need to respect the students' choices, but at the same time know when they need to convince SEN students that it is in their best interest to take full advantage of the measures that can be put in place to improve their teaching, learning and assessment experience.

On a less negative note, all three students commented positively on the use of the Virtual learning Environment WebCT for each of the modules studied, to access information/material/quizzes about the syllabus and to communicate with their tutors and peers (both via intranet forums and private intranet mail). Staff also found that the use of WebCT helped in catering for the needs of SEN students. Maria, for example, was often unable to attend classes because of her condition, but could keep in touch via WebCT.

#### **4. The four language learning skills: issues and solutions**

The assessment of a double language module at Coventry University would normally require students to pass tasks such as grammar tests, translations, essays in the foreign language, group presentations, listening comprehensions, reading comprehensions, summaries and individual oral assessments – the combination of the assessed tasks and the balance between coursework and examination depends on the level of studies. For example, at level one there are six coursework tasks and no end-of-year examination, at level two the balance is 60% coursework and 40% examination and the reverse is applied in the final year. When designing tasks to be administered to visually impaired and blind students, staff tried, as much as possible, to follow the tips outlined in the already mentioned document on *Special Education Needs* for linguists.

The teaching of the four languages skills also needed to be adapted, obviously. The needs of the two partially sighted students and those of the blind one presented some similarities, but also some considerable differences.

##### **4.1 Reading skills**

Reading skills can only be developed via assistive software for each of the three students (and Braille texts for Harry). Harry demonstrated a certain weakness in reading and reluctance to engage in further reading skills development, while the partially sighted students did not have any major problems with the reading tasks assigned. Something interesting, and possibly worthy of further study, emerged

from the interview with Sarah. It appeared that her impairment did not prevent her from inferring meaning in English, but it did in Spanish:

Do you find that reading Spanish is more difficult than reading English or is it the same kind of...?

Sarah: no no, absolutely. I really struggle if I have to, for example, read out in class because a lot of the reasons why I can read in English is because you can guess. You see the start of the word and you more or less guess what the word is without really reading it and, you know, I've done that several times in Spanish and made a right fool of myself because the word's completely different to what I think it says (Individual interview October 2006).

Harry benefited greatly from having a good helper: 'My note-taker typed the book that we were using and I was able to use my equipment to read the book in class with the class notes, and do the exercises' (Individual interview June 2006).

Some tips:

1. Partially sighted students should not be asked to read in languages classes as they need extra time to work out the letters and words in a sentence.
2. There might be blind students who can be reluctant to read in Braille and prefer to listen to texts, but at University level a high level of Braille literacy can help with academic writing. Blind students should be

encouraged to increase their Braille literacy in both English and the foreign languages studied (as there are different levels of Braille literacy). However, lecturers in mainstream settings are usually unable to help with this.

3. Foreign language helpers are very effective as a support mechanism for languages students with visual impairments and/or blindness.

#### **4.2 Writing skills**

Some problems were encountered with writing skills. Harry for example struggled with all types of written tasks, both in English and in the foreign languages studied. His literacy issues with reading were also evident in his writing. He experienced difficulties in structuring sentences, paragraphs and ideas in essays. His writing style, both in English and in the foreign languages studied, presented the features of the type of 'spoken text' one encounters in chat rooms (which he was using on a regular basis). His difficulties with writing did not appear to be eased by the use of his Duxbury Braille Translator installed in a hand-held device that he brought to all classes, which enabled him to translate from Braille-to-text and text-to-Braille (Humanware BrailleNotePK). However, it was not clear whether this difficulty with writing had to do with his blindness or with his level of literacy prior to coming to a Higher Education setting or both. There are blind students reading languages in other universities (Marina Mozzon McPherson, 2006: personal communication) who do not appear to have any major issues with writing in the foreign language (and/or in English). The findings about Harry's problem with literacy are not conclusive, more research needs to be carried out

in the field of issues relating to the written literacy of blind students at University level.

Although Maria obtained good marks for her written tasks in Spanish and in English, there appeared to be some problematic issues with her writing too, albeit on a smaller scale, similar to those experienced by Harry, such as a certain difficulty in structuring sentences, paragraphs, and ideas. In fact, both Harry's and Maria's written work presented features similar to those found in the work of students with dyslexia. It was confirmed by staff teaching literacy at the Royal National College for the Blind (Janet Dunn, 2006: personal communication), that this is often the case with the written work produced by visually impaired and blind students.

Sarah too, despite the fact that she did not appear to have any obvious difficulties with writing assessed tasks and had had experience of learning writing skills before the onset of her impairment, in reply to a question on whether or not she had noticed any changes in her writing skills, she said that:

The difference, thinking about it, that I've noticed is when I'm writing...I write words and the letter I write might appear in the middle of the word and I've missed the two or three letters off the front of the word. Like if I wanted to write "determination" I might start it with a t and I'd miss the 'd' and the 'e' off and I do that all the time when I'm writing down and I think that is something that I've done post accident and of course half the time I

can't read what I've written because if you write something down quickly and then because of my eyesight I can't read what I've written.

More research is needed in this area, on the possible links between blindness, visual impairment and dyslexia with particular reference to second language learning.

Some tips:

1. Allow for plenty of extra time for all written tasks in the foreign language, possibly even more than what has been recommended by the disability office, as the officers are not experts in language learning and tend to underestimate the time needed to complete languages tasks by a visually impaired or blind student. This is particularly true for translation tasks and especially if students are allowed the use of dictionaries. The students themselves might be asked to carry out languages tasks different from those experienced at 'A' level and might not know themselves how much extra time they need. A 'dry run' of each assessed task is recommended to identify any possible problems.
2. Be prepared to discuss academic writing issues with the relevant students and give some consideration to devising activities to increase their academic writing literacy if necessary.
3. Seek advice from the disability office regarding the assessment of essays and other written work bearing in mind that similar guidelines to those applied for students with dyslexia might have to be considered for visually impaired and blind students too.

4. Be prepared to consider major adjustments for all written tasks (Orsini-Jones *et. al.* 2005:151).

### **1.3 Listening skills and speaking skills**

Listening and speaking tasks do not normally present visually impaired or blind students with any major problems. Sarah, Maria and Harry appear to have a highly developed capacity to memorise spoken language and are all very effective communicators. Videos are obviously problematic and a good helper will be needed to describe the actions in the video to a blind student.

However, even if a listening comprehension is normally a manageable task in class, in exam conditions the information overload issue will occur, aggravated by the stress of the exam situation, particularly for listening comprehensions, where the student will have to read questions and answer them in writing. Also, if the task requires organisation of ideas, data and texts to be presented in a structured way, such as an oral presentation in the foreign language, blind or visually impaired students might encounter the same issues that they encounter when structuring an essay.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of the teaching, learning and assessment experience of Sarah, Maria and Harry between 2002-2006 would appear to indicate that the solid infrastructure of support for disabled students that is in place at Coventry



University has helped, but that more could be done. This work confirmed many of the findings from the previous related one in terms of lessons learned (Orsini-Jones *et. al.*, 2005:152):

- 1 No 'ad hoc' measures must be taken before having discussed them with the disabled student concerned;
- 2 Individual learning plans must be agreed with disabled students at the beginning of the year and must be reviewed at regular intervals;
- 3 There must be strategies in place to accommodate unexpected turns of events;
- 4 All staff (and this includes technicians, librarians, administrative staff) must work together to provide a safe and effective environment for students with disabilities;
- 5 All staff need support in supporting a disabled student, part-time hourly-paid members of staff in particular, as it can be very time-consuming to adapt languages materials and/or deliver them in accessible format;
- 6 Blind and visually impaired students suffer from information overload more than their peers, this must be borne in mind when designing assessment tasks and delivering them.
- 7 Staff across the years of study on a languages degree course must share their experiences about disabled students to provide them with a consistent and coherent level of support.

This study also highlighted new problematic factors which have occurred despite the robust support infrastructure that is in place, e.g.:

1. The students did not want to 'attract attention' towards their impairment and themselves and were prepared to renounce their right to some of the special arrangements for examinations and tests not to be treated differently from others.
2. The above created at times some tension between the students and staff as non-disclosure and/or refusal of help on the part of the students resulted in some misunderstandings. While staff understood the need to respect the students' choice, they felt at times that it would have been in the students' best interest to take advantage of all the help that was available to them to achieve higher marks.
3. The relationship between academic staff in the faculty and the staff in the disability office needs to be closely coordinated. The needs of language students are very specific and special arrangements, like having helpers who are native speakers of the language studied, need to be jointly discussed and agreed between academics and support staff.
4. In the case of 'unseen disabilities' it is sometimes easy for staff to forget that a student has an impairment and/or to overlook their needs.
5. Students who have a disability from birth might be more assertive in asking for the necessary adjustments for them than those who have become disabled later in their lives.

Despite the difficulties encountered, Harry and Sarah stated that academic success had been a great confidence booster for them. It is undeniable that each of these students is a success story. This was also confirmed by articles reporting on Harry's achievements in the local press (Anon, 2005; Lynch, 2005). Each of these students progressed with their academic studies and each coped with their year abroad: one working as a British Council Language Assistant in Spain, one on a *Leonardo da Vinci* work-placement scheme in a firm in Spain too and one attending classes and obtaining ECTS (European Credit Transfer Scheme) credits at a University in France. The languages staff's forecast was that the three students would all successfully graduate in the near future. Staff were delighted when Sarah obtained a first class degree classification in Single Honours Spanish in June 2007 (Harry and Maria will be graduating in 2008).

On the whole therefore the experience of teaching two visually impaired and a blind student has been a challenge, but a rewarding one. It has been a 'collaborative learning journey': both staff and students involved in it have successfully coped with it and learned a lot from it. However, the journey has also highlighted that not enough is known about language learning and visual impairment or blindness and that more research is needed in this field, with particular reference to the two skills of reading and writing and the connection between visual impairment or blindness and dyslexia.

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