

STEPS TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF A TEACHING ASSISTANT FOR A BLIND ENGLISH EDUCATOR

INTRODUCTION

Standing at the front of a classroom, balancing patience, knowledge, and endless challenges, proves that teaching is not just a job; it is a test of heart, vocation and resilience every single day. However, have you ever thought about how you would teach if you lost your ability to see? Camila Duran is one of the first, if not the first, blind English teacher in Uruguay. She has learned how to adapt what the theoretical books say in order to be able to deliver suitable and accurate English lessons. However, there are certain pedagogical decisions, such as board organisation, seating arrangement, or the implementation of visual aids, that are more difficult than others. In this need to provide students with the elements mentioned before, improving both the teacher and students' experience, a new role emerges between a teacher assistant and an English teacher. This article aims to analyse some quintessential aspects of this new role, such as communication, previous organisation, and the boundaries between the new role and the teacher from my experience and point of view.



Image 1. From left to right: Andrea Joyce, Camila Duran, Fabiana Zilli and Juan Pablo Teske. Professional teaching team involved in the course presented in the article.

N/B Taken by the author (2024) .

COMMUNICATION

As in every aspect of life, communication stands for the foundation of a successful experience. In this particular case, communication was the thread that pulled all the parts of the teaching, co-teaching, and assisting experience together.

First of all, being able to communicate needs. Both the teacher and the teacher's assistant will have different needs along the process that would not be the same as the ones I had in my experience. For this, being able to comfortably communicate with them, aiming for assertive communication and a problem-solving attitude will improve the experience for both the teacher and the teaching assistant. Also, in this communication of needs, there should be a space for the setting of clear boundaries between both roles in the classroom.

Second, being synchronised. As teachers, there are different requests or unforeseen situations that must be faced by us, one way or the other. Therefore, the way of answering must be the same, and for that to happen, both the teacher and the teacher assistant must communicate effectively and successfully beforehand, setting clear patterns of action. Moreover, the allowances and prohibitions of the classroom should be clear, and the way of facing rule-breaking attitudes should be set from the first moment. As well as the case previously mentioned, things like allowing students to go to the toilet when they request, authorizing students to use their electronic devices or dealing with misbehaviours are decisions that must be taken spontaneously and naturally. Therefore, a clear course of action, or a set of guidelines, for these types of situations should be discussed beforehand so that the teacher and the teacher assistant can act as one and the rules of the classroom will remain the same no matter who the students ask or who needs to face the situation.

Finally, working as a team. There are many things that communication can achieve, but teamwork is especially important. Teamwork in this scenario means feeling comfortable with asking for help, not knowing something and asking each other, feeling included in a low-risk context. In this sense, the teacher and teacher assistant should build up a learning environment where both can rely on each other and know that if one falls, the other has his or her back.

PREVIOUS ORGANISATION

A second exemplary aspect to be considered is the previous organisation of the different lessons. Even though planning is a teacher's matter, teacher assistants must plan some things in order to get the best results from the lessons. In every classroom, we have different kinds of students, from visual to kinesthetic, each of them demanding and needing different adaptations to make learning a meaningful experience. In that sense, one of the most important factors of this teaching experience is to plan and coordinate how to address these needs from a position that does not overshadow the teachers' work and that does not take a starring role in the classroom.

Another important feature to be planned with anticipation is the implementation of visual aids and board organisation. The implementation of visual aids in the EFL classroom is more than

a usual practice. However, for a blind teacher, this represents a hard-to-achieve challenge. In this scenario the teacher assistant should have reviewed the lesson plan in advance and planned how to implement the visual aids successfully so that students can take as much profit from those aids as possible, this also needs effective communication with the teacher, since he or she is who plans how to integrate the visual aids so that it fits best in the activity taking place at the moment. Moreover, a similar issue arises with board organization: it is inappropriate for the teacher to dictate content to the teacher assistant during the lesson. The information to be written on the board should be discussed, shared, and planned in advance, so that it emerges naturally from the teacher assistant as the teacher delivers the lesson.

Equally important, the teaching and correction of writing and spelling rely on both the teacher and the teaching assistant. Blind teachers can teach and correct spelling on their own without the need for a teacher assistant. However, it is a highly time-consuming process since, in order to correct spelling, for instance, students have to dictate letter by letter each word so that the teacher is able to check if it is correct or not. In this sense, the teacher and teacher assistant may choose to share this responsibility so that the teacher assistant is able to streamline the process by correcting any spelling mistakes that can be present in students' writing.

Additionally, when working on the macro skill of writing, it is possible to co-teach: the teacher can focus on the more theoretical aspects such as coherence, structure, and formality; while the teacher assistant can address more practical elements like working with language chunks, providing examples of written compositions, and exploring various discursive genres.

BOUNDARIES

First and foremost, establishing clear boundaries between the two roles is essential to maintaining professional integrity and personal well-being, as it prevents role confusion, fosters efficiency, and promotes healthier interactions. Something that can be confusing is that in order to be a blind English teacher assistant, you should have some knowledge about teaching English, and you must have knowledge about the language. However, this does not mean that you are going to take the role of the English teacher in the classroom unless it is needed. Therefore, setting boundaries between the responsibilities of each role is important to avoid confusion about who is who. Students may get confused about the presence of two “teachers” in the classroom and may start asking questions, expecting both to teach, explain, give instructions, and manage the classroom and this is not the idea. This first experience has shown that the more students understand the difference between the two roles, the more comfortable they feel.

Moreover, the boundaries that are established also help the teacher and the teacher assistant work more efficiently and in a more coordinated manner, as they are aware of who is responsible for assisting certain situations and what to expect from one another. Another feature that is enlightened by having clear boundaries is efficiency. Clear boundaries ensure that each individual knows their specific duties, such as the teacher focusing on lesson planning and content delivery, while the assistant handles organizational tasks like managing

materials, supporting students with specific needs, or organising the board and visual aids. This division of labour minimizes overlap and confusion, enabling both educators to work cohesively without redundancies. Both educators are professionals, and so by clearly outlining roles and duties, they are able to tap into their fullest potential, thus improving the quality of the class as well as working together better.

Finally, setting boundaries promotes healthier interactions by fostering mutual respect and clarity in the relationship. Clearly defined roles reduce misunderstandings and help avoid potential conflicts over tasks or decision-making situations. Boundaries allow the teacher and the teacher assistant to understand their scope of responsibility and to act accordingly without overlapping with their colleague. Therefore, respecting the boundaries set previously encourages open and respectful communication, ensuring that both individuals feel valued and heard. Moreover, the setting of boundaries also promotes healthier interactions with students by providing consistency in their roles and expectations. For instance, when students have a specific need, they will know who to approach, whether it is for academic inquiries or for any other kind of support needed.

CONCLUSION

All things considered, the role of a teacher assistant who works with a blind English teacher is enhanced by communication, the division of tasks and a clear set of boundaries. The principal aim and scope of responsibility of the teacher assistant is to support the blind English teacher in those activities that are harder to achieve or complete without the ability to see, such as the implementation of visual aids, the organization of the classroom and classroom management. These two roles are interdependent since the aim of the assistant is to support the teacher and, for this to happen successfully, the teacher needs to support and communicate with the assistant. When the roles are clearly defined and the areas to be managed by each educator are set in place, both educators are able to focus on their pedagogical duties, therefore improving the teaching experience using both their expertise to get the best out of their lessons. This new role, created to integrate blind professionals into education, is key in the area of diversity and needs further research, but it is a big step on the right path to enable blind people the right to work as professional educators.

CAMINADO HACIA UNA EDUCACIÓN INCLUSIVA: EL ROL DE UN ASISTENTE DOCENTE PARA UNA EDUCADORA DE INGLÉS CIEGA

INTRODUCCIÓN

Estar al frente de un salón de clases, equilibrando paciencia, conocimiento y desafíos constantes, demuestra que la docencia no es simplemente un trabajo, sino una prueba diaria de corazón, vocación y resiliencia. Sin embargo, ¿Alguna vez te has preguntado cómo enseñarías si perdieras la capacidad de ver? Camila Durán es una de las primeras, si no la primera, profesora de inglés que es ciega en Uruguay. Ha aprendido a adaptar lo que los manuales teóricos proponen para poder ofrecer clases de inglés adecuadas y precisas. No obstante, hay ciertos aspectos, como la organización del pizarrón, la disposición del mobiliario o el uso de recursos visuales, que resultan más complejos que otros. Ante la necesidad de proporcionar a los estudiantes estos elementos y mejorar la experiencia tanto del docente como del alumnado surge un nuevo rol intermedio entre el asistente de docente y el profesor de inglés. Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar algunos aspectos fundamentales de este nuevo rol, tales como la comunicación, la organización previa y los límites entre este nuevo rol y el de la docente, desde mi experiencia y punto de vista.



Figura 1. De izquierda a derecha: Andrea Joyce, Camila Duran, Fabiana Zilli y Juan Pablo Teske. Equipo profesional docente involucrado en el curso presentado en el artículo. Foto del autor (2024)

COMUNICACIÓN

Como en todo ámbito de la vida, la comunicación constituye la base de una experiencia exitosa. En este caso en particular, la comunicación fue el hilo conductor que unió todas las partes del proceso de enseñanza, co-enseñanza, aprendizaje y asistencia. En primer lugar, la capacidad de comunicar necesidades. Tanto el docente como el asistente tendrán necesidades distintas a lo largo del proceso, que pueden no coincidir con las que yo experimenté. Por ello, poder comunicarse de forma cómoda y asertiva, con una actitud orientada a la resolución de problemas, mejorará la experiencia para ambas partes. Asimismo, en esta comunicación de necesidades debe haber espacio para establecer límites claros entre los dos roles dentro del aula.

En segundo lugar, es fundamental estar sincronizados. Como docentes, enfrentamos solicitudes diversas o situaciones imprevistas que deben ser atendidas por uno u otro. Para que las respuestas sean coherentes, ambos, docente y asistente, deben comunicarse de manera efectiva y establecer de antemano patrones claros de acción. Además, las normas de aula, tanto en cuanto a permisos como a prohibiciones, deben ser conocidas por ambos y consensuadas desde el inicio. Situaciones como permitir a un estudiante ir al baño, autorizar el uso de dispositivos electrónicos o manejar conductas disruptivas deben resolverse de manera espontánea y natural, y para ello se requiere una guía de acción discutida previamente, que asegure coherencia sin importar quién esté gestionando la situación.

Por último, trabajar en equipo. La comunicación puede lograr muchas cosas, pero el trabajo en equipo es esencial. Esto implica sentirse cómodo para pedir ayuda, admitir que se desconoce algo y hacerlo en un contexto de bajo riesgo. En este sentido, docente y asistente deben construir un ambiente de aprendizaje donde ambos puedan apoyarse mutuamente, sabiendo que, si uno cae, el otro estará allí para sostenerlo.

ORGANIZACIÓN PREVIA

Otro aspecto clave a considerar es la organización previa de las distintas clases. Aunque la planificación es una responsabilidad del docente, el asistente debe preparar ciertos elementos para lograr los mejores resultados. En todo salón de clases hay diversidad de estilos de aprendizaje, desde visuales hasta kinestésicos, y cada uno requiere adaptaciones específicas para que el aprendizaje sea significativo. Por ende, uno de los factores más importantes en esta experiencia docente es planificar cómo abordar dichas necesidades sin eclipsar el trabajo del docente ni ocupar un rol protagónico.

Asimismo, la implementación de ayudas visuales y la organización del pizarrón requieren planificación anticipada. Aunque el uso de recursos visuales es común en la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera, para un/a docente ciega representa un desafío importante. En este contexto, el asistente debe haber revisado previamente la planificación y coordinado cómo implementar estos recursos de forma eficaz, lo cual también exige una comunicación estrecha con el docente, quien define el momento y el propósito pedagógico de cada recurso. Lo mismo sucede con el pizarrón: no es viable que durante la clase la docente dicte al

asistente qué escribir; esta información debe ser discutida, compartida y planificada con anterioridad para que fluya de manera natural durante la clase.

Por último, la enseñanza y corrección de la escritura y la ortografía es una tarea que puede ser compartida. Aunque un docente que es ciego puede corregir ortografía por sí mismo, mediante dictado letra por letra por parte del estudiante, esto consume mucho tiempo. Por tanto, se puede optar por dividir la responsabilidad para agilizar el proceso. En el caso de la producción escrita, también es posible co-enseñar: el docente puede centrarse en los aspectos teóricos (cohesión, orden, formalidad) mientras que el asistente puede trabajar aspectos prácticos como "*language chunks*", presentar modelos de redacción o géneros discursivos.

LÍMITES

Establecer límites claros entre los dos roles es esencial para mantener la integridad profesional y el bienestar personal, ya que evita confusiones, promueve la eficiencia y facilita interacciones más saludables. Puede resultar confuso que el asistente de un/a docente deba tener conocimientos tanto de didáctica del inglés como del idioma en sí. No obstante, esto no implica asumir el rol de docente, salvo que sea estrictamente necesario.

Por tanto, establecer límites entre las responsabilidades de cada uno es crucial para evitar que los estudiantes confundan los roles. Si bien pueden percibir que hay dos "docentes" en el aula, es importante que comprendan que las funciones no son idénticas. Esta primera experiencia ha demostrado que cuanto más comprenden la diferencia entre los dos roles, mayor es la comodidad en el aula.

Además, estos límites ayudan al docente y al asistente a trabajar de manera más fluida y coordinada, sabiendo qué esperar del otro. Una consecuencia directa es la eficiencia: con funciones claramente delimitadas, el docente planificando y dirigiendo la clase, y el asistente encargándose de cuestiones organizativas, se minimizan las superposiciones y se maximiza la cohesión del equipo. Ambos son profesionales, y al tener bien definidas sus tareas pueden desarrollar todo su potencial y mejorar la calidad educativa.

Finalmente, establecer límites promueve interacciones más saludables, con respeto mutuo y claridad. Esto reduce malentendidos y evita conflictos relacionados con decisiones o tareas. Los límites también mejoran la relación con los y las estudiantes, brindando coherencia en los roles y expectativas. Por ejemplo, si un estudiante necesita ayuda, sabrá a quién dirigirse dependiendo del tipo de necesidad, ya sea académica o de otra índole.

CONCLUSIÓN

En síntesis, el rol del asistente de un/a docente de inglés con discapacidad visual se fortalece mediante la comunicación, la división de tareas y la delimitación de funciones. La función principal del asistente es brindar apoyo en aquellas actividades que resultan difíciles de realizar sin visión, como el uso de recursos visuales, la organización del aula y el manejo de la clase. Ambos roles son interdependientes: el éxito del asistente radica en su capacidad de apoyar al docente, quien a su vez debe establecer una comunicación efectiva. Cuando los

roles están claramente definidos y se han acordado las áreas de actuación de cada uno, ambos profesionales pueden centrarse en sus deberes pedagógicos, mejorando así la experiencia educativa y aprovechando al máximo sus conocimientos. Este nuevo rol, creado para integrar profesionales ciegos en el sistema educativo, es fundamental en el camino hacia la inclusión y la diversidad. Si bien requiere más investigación y desarrollo, representa un paso firme hacia el reconocimiento del derecho de las personas ciegas a desempeñarse como educadores en igualdad de condiciones.

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