

## THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN THE TEACHING OF ART AND DESIGN TO VISUALLY IMPAIRED PUPILS: A CASE STUDY OF COPOTA SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND IN MASVINGO DISTRICT IN ZIMBABWE

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**Abstract:** *Learners who are visually handicapped face unique challenges in the education system or precisely in the learning of art, particularly those who were born blind. Yet with more radical changes to teaching and medium of instruction, learners who are blind can perform to their maximum potential. This study focused on establishing how language as a medium of communication can enhance or impede the acquisition of art skills and content. It also aimed to establish which form and type of language is effective and to what extent. A qualitative research paradigm was adopted as suitable for this case study of Margreth Hugo School for the blind in Masvingo province in Zimbabwe. Purposive sampling was employed to select two teachers and their classes, that were observed teaching art and for the interviews. Therefore three data collection methods namely, observation, interviews and document analysis were used. Results among other things indicated that language, first or second, is critical in the teaching of art to the visually handicapped. Visually handicapped learners can learn and make some form of art regardless of their situation. Recommendations have been brought forward to develop a rich adjectival dictionary that can enhance description of art works and art skills to the visually handicapped.*

**Key words:** *visual impairment/handicapped, language*

### Background

Art as a discipline in the education system is meant to be appreciated using one's sense of sight. It is of interest to note that this discipline is also done and appreciated by those who are visually handicapped.

The first school for the visually handicapped was established in 1791. Children identified as requiring special provision tended to receive training rather than an education, the aim being, to

give them access to employment and to enable them to become productive members of the society.

The 1981 and 1993 Education acts define special educational needs as significant learning difficulties or as impediments to the use of the same educational facilities as others (Fish and Evans 1995). Nowadays, all children are entitled to education appropriate to their needs. A child may receive education in any one of many situations, such as at home, mainstream school (nursery, primary, secondary), special school and hospital. In all of these places a child may receive attention from a teacher. Margaret Hugo school for the blind caters for pupils who have special education needs. Today the visually handicapped are put in formal schools to get education that empowers the individual after school.

Art deals with all human senses e.g. touch, smell, taste, sight and hearing. It is quite interesting to note that the visually handicapped have transferred their sight to their hands and ears. 'In fact they see with their hands and ears', in other words, they have a strong sense of touch and hearing. They appreciate the beauty of the artifacts they make through touch and listening. The teacher then plays an important role in using language to explain to pupils how beautiful the artifact is. The students have to appreciate beauty through what the teacher tells them. The teacher employs technical language to explain beauty. Language plays a very crucial role in teaching the visually handicapped children. It is language that is used which enables these pupils to appreciate artifacts they make. This only means that the teacher should have a very good command of language which can either be English or any other indigenous language. Mostly, English is used as a medium of instruction during teaching.

At times it is necessary to use an indigenous language where pupils do not understand English and let the learners touch where words equivalents cannot be obtained to describe. This helps pupils to get a good understanding of the subject. In addition, instructions should be very simple and straight forward in order for pupils to be able to follow. Therefore, language, exoglossic, endoglossic, non-/ verbal is critical in communicating with the visually handicapped.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Visual impairment is a general term that describes all degrees and types of blindness irrespective of its cause and the age at which it was acquired. However, a number of variables (degree, type, cause and age of onset) combine in a student with sight loss to produce a unique impact upon the student personal, intellectual and educational development (Ashman & Elkins, 2009). In some instances, sight loss can be accompanied by one or more of the other disabilities or impairments, any combination of which has profound implications for life and learning for the individual possessing them.

The term, 'blind' signifies a more severe degree of sight loss. Although the word is used inconsistently, 'blindness' usually denotes "the inability to see and perceive through sight" (Gallaudet Research Institute, 2007). This means visual impairment that is so severe such that the child is unable to receive and process visual information through sight, with or without aid and that adversely affects a child's educational performance (Gallaudet Research Institute, 2007). One characteristic of children who are visually handicapped is that they may have little or no mental imaging at all depending on the severity of the sight loss and the age of on set.

Different visual impairments lead to different levels of sight, and but even people who are congenitally blind can perceive visual images by tactile or auditory means. Given proper training, blind people can understand and recreate in two-dimensional drawings using either a pen or raised line drawing boards. They can create two-dimensional renderings of shapes they have felt in three dimensions, and can create mental images of objects they have experienced through tactile graphics or verbal description.

Verbal description is central and most frequently used in informing a visually handicapped learner about the environment and content of an art work. S/he therefore depends on the interpretation, translation or personal understanding of the sighted, the teacher. Language Interpretation and translation has its own challenges and constraints. Robins (1980) posits that there is usually content loss or gain in interpretation and translation due cultural inhibitions. For instance, a description of a sexual scene in *chishona* would be politely and ethically expressed as "*vanhu vari pabonde*" [ People on a reedmate]( literal translation).

In the United States of America organisations like Art Education for the Blind (AEB) is committed to making the visual arts accessible to the visually handicapped population by producing educational programs that utilize multi-sensory methods such as touch and sound. The program uses tactile diagrams, in-depth narratives, and atmospheric sound compositions to explain many examples of art works; both painting and sculpture are included in the series. Some works of art are especially complex and therefore these examples must incorporate several different types of raised patterns in order to fully describe compositional and stylistic details. While visually handicapped art learners in these developed countries have the pleasure and access to such medium, their counterparts in the third world countries such as Zimbabwe have to depend on the descriptive prowess of the teacher which means that the teacher plays a very crucial role in explaining to pupils.

A similar project in Birmingham, England called "Sound and Touch" has collaborated with "Art History through Touch and Sound" which explains the space and environment of selected English cathedrals. The sense of touch and hearing are important alternatives to the learner who has no sight. Therefore, these (sound and touch) should be utilised to fullest potential.

In Japan, Workshops at Azabu Art Museum in Tokyo were organised by Yohei Nishimura who wrote a fascinating book ("Let's Make What We've Never Seen'). These were attended by visually impaired people, some partially sighted, some totally blind, the partially sighted and a number of fully sighted people wearing blindfolds. It was very interesting to see the level of ability the participants had acquired with touch and also the scale that they were working with. They were working with massive pieces of clay in many cases.

The success of touch art in Japan stems less from the considerable support given to art teachers working with visually handicapped people by the education system, and more from the fact that the artists/art teachers themselves are very accomplished people and quite often come from an exceptionally rich ceramic tradition, and have very good linguistic background. Therefore once again language is pivotal in aiding perception of visual objects to the visually handicapped.

There are several methodologies used with people who are visually impaired. People who are completely visually handicapped often choose three-dimensional modalities, such as clay or

papier-mâché, or raised line drawing boards. Contrary to popular belief, many visually handicapped people are interested in color. Visually handicapped people want to learn the differences between what is conveyed by different colors, not only to understand art, but also to use color in their own artworks. Visually handicapped people work in different styles and use different media, ranging from sculpture to photography. People who have lost their vision or have partial vision include famous artists such as Monet and Van Gogh, Monet and Vincent Van Gogh are renown impressionists and post impressionists who have worked with intricacy of colour. Monet (1877) "*The Gare St Lazare in Paris*", VanGogh (1889) "*A Cornfield with Cypresses*" are some examples of impressionist movement painting.

Plato's idealism suggests that the real art is not in the eyes but in the mind. Conceptual art is entirely different yet still creative. Readymade objects have often been displayed in art settings, the most famous being Marcel Duchamp's 'Fountain'. Vision isn't needed to produce this 'thinking art'. Deconstructionism is heavily dependent on the artist prowess to use language and give meaning to artworks.

Bressler (1994) states that how we as readers make meaning out of or from the next or work of art will depend upon mental framework that each of us has developed concerning the nature of reality. This framework or worldview consists of the presumptions or pre suppositions that we all hold (either consciously or unconsciously concerning the basic make up of our world).

The teacher or the colleague who is sighted acts as the practical critic rendering interpretation and analysis of the artworks. The practical critic according to Bressler (1994) defines the standards of taste and explains, evaluates or justifies a particular piece of art. Thus the interpretation presented to the visually handicapped depends on the social cultural philosophical and psychological background of the viewer. Literary theories differ widely. For example, one theory stresses the work itself, believing that the text alone contains all the necessary information, the elements, colour, form and technique. The other theory places a work of art in its cultural, historical and or sociological setting. Therefore the artists and its audience can concur on the interpretation. The other theory places emphasis on the texts audience. Therefore the literary theory which the teacher operations from consciously or unconsciously, informed or uninformed, eclectic or unified has a great bearing on the visually handicapped learner.

Therefore a logical and clearly articulated theory enables the sight gifted reader to establish interpretations consistent and objective.

There are many reasons for teaching visually impaired people about both art history and the making of art. Sighted and visually handicapped people benefit both from the critical thinking skills, language skills, cooperative learning, and general life enrichment provided in history. Studying art making can serve to foster sensory awareness, manual dexterity, self-confidence, and self-awareness. Above these benefits the visually handicapped individuals get braille-reading skills, mobility and map-reading skills, and tactile-exploration skills, all of which contribute significantly to a person's academic and professional success. Therefore being versed in visual culture, language and contributing to it, helps visually handicapped people to break through social barriers and enables their full participation in the art world. Regardless of all the benefits and efforts being made to teach art to the visually impaired, many circles still think art is a practice or profession often given up with sight loss: it is visual after all.

### **Research Objectives**

This research study was therefore guided by the following research objectives. The study aimed at:

- establishing to what extent language can hinder or enhance the teaching of art,
- identifying which type or form of language facilitated art teaching; non-/ verbal, first or second language, and
- recognizing how and to what extent visually impaired art learners perceived visual images.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative case study research design involving Margret Hugo school for the Blind commonly known as Copota in Masvingo province, Zimbabwe was used in this study. According to Borg and Gall (1989), case studies are done for the purpose of either producing a detailed description about a phenomenon or developing possible explanations of a phenomenon or evaluating a phenomenon. Qualitative research paradigm seeks to understand human behavior from the

actors' own frame of reference (*emic*). Hence, this study seeks to understand the 'cultural' context of the people involved in the teaching and learning of art. Therefore, a case study was found suitable for its in-depth descriptive function.

Borg and Gall (1993) suggests that purposive sampling can be used in selecting the sample for a case study by identifying and selecting subjects more likely to be knowledgeable about the phenomena under study. The school has an art special teacher therefore he was selected purposefully as one of the two interviewees sampled. The second interviewee was randomly selected as the whole school has special needs educators with visually handicapped learners in their classes.

The researchers used observations, interviews, questionnaires and document analysis as means of collecting data. The study also used the document analysis method of data collection. Marshall and Rossman (1999) view document analysis as a method for describing and interpreting the artifacts of a society or social group. The content analytic approach was used to analyse artworks by the visually handicapped learners. Short interviews as suggested by Chivore (1990) were used to aid document analysis for enlightening the evaluators on the culture, socio-politics and socio-economic educational background of the visually handicapped art learners.

## Findings

From the data collected, respondents expressed different views on the value and relevance of language in the teaching of art to the blinds.

Teachers expressed concern on which language to use since the policy advocates for the use of English to higher grades, yet these visually handicapped pupils haven't mastered the basics of the second language due to marginalization. In most cases, teachers find themselves using the learners' first language in order to communicate effectively.

In terms of perceiving visual images, teachers or colleagues have to describe or read an art work for the learners to appreciate a painting or drawing hence they are two steps removed from the artist in visual aesthetics. The process is very similar to translating or interpreting an artwork. There is therefore inevitably as in every translation, content gain or content loss. The truth is

exaggerated or distorted due to several language translation problems. The learner, during the translation process does not get the true aesthetic appreciation s/he could have felt him/herself.

The language used in describing an art employ technical terms of the subject in visual aesthetics which could be in most cases difficult to get the vernacular equivalent and teachers end up borrowing terms, coining and adopting new terms and meaning is lost along the process, for example words like tone or shade.

To those born blind it is difficult to explain and describe everything without giving examples of equivalence they have never seen. For instance, describing colour such as red, one can never say like blood because they have never seen that.

The totally blind, depend totally on the verbal comments and instructions given by their teacher and colleagues. They depend on the teacher's expertise that has to give a detailed description of how beautiful the artifact is and should be able to do that in a manner that appeals to the learner's sense of beauty. The teacher's description should compel the learner to believe that the artifact he or she has made is beautiful. The teacher uses adjectival phrases to describe beauty. Appreciation which is an aesthetic skill is derived by faith in the teacher. They believe what the teacher says. The teacher should therefore have a good command of language.

Learners were observed tearing paper in preparation for pulp to make papier-mâché, therefore, learners who are completely blind often choose three-dimensional modalities. There were also samples of baskets, reed weaving, collage which the blind learners constructed on their own with ease and perfection.

A blind, deaf and dumb learner, who was observed, managed to mould a human figure on a pallet though with full assistance of the teacher. The pupil demonstrated that she had mastered elements of line, shape and form to some significant level though not perfect. She moulded a round human head using plasticine and the rest of the body, hands and legs using string as the graphic line. The human figure image was created with relative proportions. The principle of proportion was mastered to a certain degree because the hands were represented proportionally smaller to the legs and the size of the head was in proportional harmony to the body.



The teacher's involvement in giving instructions to visually handicapped and deaf learners is critical and greater than just to a blind learner. The instructions are hands led. The communication is non-verbal throughout. The teacher holds the learners hands and directs them to different body parts at a time to inform which part they are constructing. Perception is through touch. It is the sense of touch that informs them of elements such as texture, line, shape, form, only if it is relief or raised art or 3 dimensional arts. Elements such as colour, tone and value are non achievable. Principles of space, balance and dominance are perceived the same way. The teacher directs the learner's hand each time to a surface or object which the learner should perceive. Through non-verbal language the learner is instructed to reconstruct the image. Teaching and learning of this nature is time consuming and cannot warrant the inclusive learning syllabus coverage. Therefore, learning of art in these instructional conditions to these physically challenged learners is not examination oriented.

The teachers acknowledged that they give home work tasks, for example, to collect beads and other raw materials for crafts in the next lessons. The types of homework given are not cognitively challenging because blind learners require monitoring and immediate feedback in their actions. That communication is centered on an expert special education teacher.

Therefore there are challenges of inclusion, examination and assessment. The examination system to date in the country does not cater for the blinds in content and structure. Literature for other subjects has already been transcribed in Braille but no images have been developed with raised relief to cater for the tactile perception of the visuals

## **Conclusions**

Verbal or non verbal language is very important for imparting knowledge and giving instructions to the blind art learners. Therefore, language used should be appropriate to the learners for it is only through language that visually handicapped learners can acquire skills or concepts of doing art. It is language that can hinder or enhance learning of art to visually handicapped learners.

It can also be concluded that regardless of physical limitations, learners with visual impairment can learn some form of art to a significant level of perfection with proper non-verbal instruction.

Learners with visual handicap can best perform in certain types of arts and crafts. They will perform best in 3 dimensional arts like sculpture, basketry, weaving, construction, papier-mâché where the sense of touch is the mainly used means of perception combined with proper use of descriptive language.

The perceiving and making of 2 dimensional arts such as drawing and painting heavily depends on mental imaging and is a toll order to the blind art learner especially one born blind. There is heavy dependence on building from what the art learner has already conceptualized or has already created (a schema) basing on prior experience or verbal descriptions acquired. Therefore, creating vivid and accurate mental images through verbal descriptions is difficult given the aforementioned constraints of language, translation and culture.

The teaching of art to the visually handicapped is depended on the teacher's prowess in non-/verbal language. The teacher has to be highly skilled in language and art skills involved. It is from the adjectival words or phrases which the teacher uses which can help the art learners recreate and create mental images of art works. If the teacher fails to describe the colour blue, red, yellow, the learner will fail to conceptualise these colours. Whether exoglossic, endoglossic or non-/verbal language is used as medium of communication, it is important to ensure that there is effective transmission of information from the teacher (sender) to the learner (receiver) (Lasswell, 1947).

### **Recommendations**

There is serious need for training special needs art teachers who are highly competent in both the skill and grammar of art. That is, those teachers who can equally talk about art as much as they can do it.

Teachers and artists need to research, create and agree on tactile forms that can infer abstract elements such as colour, tone and value to enhance communication through the sense of touch.

Linguists and artists need to research, agree and develop a dictionary of technical lexicon and phrases which can be used in art to effectively communicate across ages and cultures. In cases where the terms are not available for equivalent translations, consensus coining, borrowing, adoption and adaptation can be done.

Institutions with visually handicapped art learners should invest in providing paintings and art literature with braille signage because non-/ verbal means of communication is not comprehensive on its own given the limitations discussed above.

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