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What is this Blind Student Doing in My Classroom?!

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I got the idea for my title from a book by Gillian Gale, a publication of the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind. I immediately took to the title, "What's this Blind Child Doing in My Classroom," because I recognized it as the way people talk in a teachers' lounge. Not in the careful, polite and politically correct tones used at an academic conference, but in the emotional straightforward way people speak when changes which are not understood are about to occur in their lives. And they are afraid. And unsure of what to do.

Eleven years ago, in my first year at the Division for the Visually Impaired, Tsukuba College of Technology, one of the teachers, a former principal of a school for the blind, gave me

a few pamphlets from the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, Burwood Educational Centre for Blind Children, Australia. These pamphlets opened the door a bit for a view into the educational and social situation of the visually impaired.

But it wasn't until the year 2000 that I began thinking of giving this presentation. While in a session at the JALT2000 conference, I read in the November 2nd issue of the Japan Times, that in Osaka, "local education authorities plan to start a five-year test period from the next academic year, in which they will accept a few mentally impaired students at each high school" and that "a barrier-free system is expected to be fully in place by 2006." And then came the Monbukakusho Directive No. 148 (学校教育法施行令一部改正について/gakkou kyoiku hou sekourei ichibu kaisei ni tsuite/Revision of the School Education Enactment Law) on April 24, 2002, which gives very strong impetus to allowing handicapped students, who are not multi-handicapped, to be mainstreamed throughout the national system. I felt that the educational climate was changing and that this was an appropriate time for the presentation.

It must be stated early in this discussion that although my target audience here is teachers of mainstream/integrated schools or colleges who may have a visually impaired student in their classroom, (alongside sighted/non-handicapped students) that I have never had that experience myself. Our division of our college is only for the visually impaired. So although our situation is different or unique, I hope that those in a mainstream institution would find our experience to be of value. (Note: Highly recommended is "Led by the Blind" by John Herbert, TLT Vol. 23 No. 8, which deals specifically with a blind student in a mainstream Japanese university.)

The World Situation

In developed countries, 70% of blind people are unemployed, while in developing countries less than 5% of blind children have access to any kind of formal education. Everywhere the same questions are being asked: Which is better, mainstream education or residential schools? (Does a school for the blind offer a special opportunity? Or is it segregation? Discrimination?) Integrated or sheltered employment? Are reserved occupations for a certain group a good thing? Countries and communities deal with the situation in various ways. In Jordan, the telephone operators are usually blind women. In Spain, a common occupation for blind men is selling lottery tickets on the street. In Taiwan, massage therapy in medical facilities is a reserved occupation for the blind, a point strongly debated in legislative bodies by sighted people who wish to enter the occupation. In the United States, blind people are given first preference for the lease of concession stands in federal office buildings.

Attitudes vary. In the Proceedings of the 9th Quinquennial Conference of the International Council for the Education of the Visually Impaired, representatives wrote about the attitudes towards blindness in their countries. Nepal: "...curse of God or a result of their past deeds," Kenya: "...curse from God, a sin and a bad omen for that family," Saudi Arabia: "...curse," Philippines: "...curse," "hide (the person)."

Tsukuba College of Technology

The situation of a group is intertwined with the social and economic situation of a country or community. As Japan is now in a situation of relative social calm and economic prosperity,

the students who enter our college have good opportunities. The college is sometimes criticized because only blind or visually impaired people may apply. My feeling is that this is a moot point, because after three years of study, graduates can enter mainstream society in medical or information technology fields. (Employment is aided by the Employment Promotion for the Disabled Act 「障害者雇用促進法/shougaisha koyou sokushinhou」 which stipulates that 21 of every 1000 government (national, prefectural and local) employees be legally handicapped and 18 of every 1000 private sector employees be legally handicapped. (Companies employing over 300 workers are liable to fines for non-compliance.) Also, people who have lost their vision in mid-life come to gain new skills, as they cannot continue in their former occupations.

Some Classroom Activities

Here are a few activities which I have used and which have worked well for me. It must be borne in mind that our situation is very teacher and learner-friendly, i.e., the classroom/LL has an oval discussion table along with 15 multimedia booths and a master console. The bookshelves contain large print, as well as Braille dictionaries. We have lamps available for students who need added light, CCTVs (Optiscopes), Braille displays and screen readers at the booths, and an environment where students are encouraged to use their personal assistive devices, e.g., Braille stylus, Perkins Brailers, magnifying glasses, or binoculars. Class size for foreign language classes can be about 20, but are usually around 10.

It is important to note that at our college, most faculty members (including myself) do not hold a special license, as would teachers at a school for the blind. Members of the Department of Physical Therapy must be Licensed Physical

Therapists, members of the Department of Acupuncture and Moxibustion must be licensed in that field or possess an M.D., and members of the Department of Computer Science must be qualified in their field. But they are not required to take special education classes. So my individual methodology is based on my own education and experience. And most of the activities I use at TCT are adaptations (with simple modifications to minimize the importance of sight) of what I also use at the University at Tsukuba, where there are about 45 sighted students in a class.

- a) **If You:** The teacher says, “If you...” and gives a command, e.g., “If you are a man (have been to Hakkeijima Sea Paradise, have visited China, like to ski, etc.) stand up.” Once everyone is standing the teacher gets the class to sit down, e.g., “If you like spaghetti (have been to Kitakyushu, play floor volleyball, ate natto this morning, etc.) sit down.” This is my standard one-minute warm-up.
- b) **Something I Did This Weekend/This Week:** The teacher models the activity and then gives an allotted amount of preparation time for a short presentation, e.g., “OK, that’s what I did this weekend. Take 10 minutes for preparation. Your presentation should be about a minute. You may read it.” Students are allowed to consult with others and check dictionaries. When students present they may use the CCTV, magnifying glass, or read their Braille. A student is assigned to ask the presenter a question.
- c) **Signing:** Sign language (e.g., JSL [Japanese Sign Language], ASL [American Sign Language], BSL [British Sign Language]) are common at our other campus (Division for the Hearing Impaired), and some of our faculty, staff, and students (the students

have a Sign Language Circle for JSL, and the teachers have an ASL Study Group) are interested in it, and I have incorporated it to a limited degree into my “teacher’s toolbox.” Simple activities such as self-introductions or singing songs while signing them have been successful. Students with some vision readily assist those without vision. Once some of the students catch on to a new concept, the cooperation among the students makes the activities run smoothly.

As our college has a summer study trip which includes a visit to our sister-college NTID (National Technical Institute for the Deaf in Rochester, New York), I have emphasized the necessity of being able to give a short greeting and self-introduction in ASL as a requirement for participation. This has been an effective incentive.

- d) **Pronunciation:** Exercises based on techniques found in *English Pronunciation—A Sound Approach*. The teacher makes two columns using minimal pairs on the board; e.g., Column 1 has /s/ words, e.g., sick, sing, sing. Column 2 has /th/ words, e.g., thick, thing, think. The teacher says, “if I say, ‘sick’ raise one finger. If I say, ‘thick’ raise two fingers.” The teacher confirms the answer by tapping on the board, i.e., one tap means the correct answer is from Column 1. Two taps means it’s from Column 2. Students then take turns being the teacher.
- e) **Skits:** Taken from the book *Listen & Act*. The teacher acts as the director of a short skit with two or three students. In groups, students alternate being the director, using scripts which have been prepared in Braille or enlarged fonts.

- f) **Dictation/Using the Computer:** The teacher plays a pre-recorded dictation and students record it. They listen and transcribe it (using pen or Braille stylus or Braille) at their LL booths. Then the class goes to the discussion table, where a partially sighted student goes to the board. Another student reads from his paper and the student at the board writes. Spelling is checked and students correct their transcription. On completion everyone is assigned one section to memorize and later to recite. Then everyone returns to the Multimedia/LL booths and inputs the dictation. Totally blind students use the keypad and a voice program such as outSPOKEN (sometimes with a Braille display to check what they have input), whereas low vision students usually prefer to use the mouse with either a magnifying glass or enlargement software (e.g., Zoomtext) with the voice turned off.
- g) **Books on Cassette:** Students select a cassette of a story or essay, listen to it, and give a report during the next class.

a new private university in our city. One of our students ran after the ball and smashed his forehead against the wall. He was OK. Not a serious injury. I looked up at the multi-million yen beautiful gymnasium and also thought of their expensive computer labs. Couldn't someone have thought of putting padding on the walls? I checked the price of the padding at our gym. 600,000 yen. And I checked the price of the padding in our swimming pool. 100,000 yen. Our team could enjoy basketball because we used a multi-colored ball instead of the standard brown one. Same price. Many needed modifications do not require large budgets, or high technology, or high educational principles. They require modifications in the way people think and feel. 1981 was the UN International Year of Disabled Persons. The following was on a brochure from the Task Force of Disabled Persons & The Church, National Christian Council of Japan. It's from 1 Peter 4:7-11:

“God has given each of you some special abilities; be sure to use them to help each other.”

Conclusion

As stated earlier, our situation is special. But in a mainstream classroom, simple modifications/considerations such as having a lamp available, or allowing a student to sit in the front of the room, or giving a cassette instead of print, to allowing and accepting the use of magnifiers, Braille or other personal assistive tools, can be a great help. The educational situation in Japan is changing and we will all be facing future challenges, inside and outside of the classroom. I will conclude with an outside-of-the-classroom story. Several years ago, our basketball team (made up of low vision students) was playing a team at