

Spatial Mental Imagery in Students with Visual Impairments when Learning Literal and Metaphorical Uses of Prepositions in English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract : There is an important research gap regarding accessible pedagogical techniques for teaching foreign languages to adults with visual impairments. English as a foreign language (EFL), in particular, is needed in many countries to expand occupational opportunities and improve living standards. Within EFL research, teaching and learning prepositions have only recently gained momentum, considering that they constitute one of the most difficult structures to learn in a foreign language and are fundamental for communicating about spatial relations in the world, both on the physical and imaginary levels. Learning to use prepositions would not only facilitate communication when referring to the surrounding tangible environment but also when conveying ideas about abstract topics (e.g., justice, love, society), for which students' sociocultural knowledge about space could play an important role. By potentiating visually impaired students' ability to construe mental spatial imagery, this study made efforts to explore pedagogical techniques that cater to their strengths, helping them create new worlds by welcoming and expanding their sociocultural funds of knowledge as they learn to use English prepositions. Fifteen visually impaired adults living in Chile participated in the study. Their first language was Spanish, and they were learning English at the intermediate level of proficiency in an EFL workshop at La Biblioteca Central para Ciegos (The Central Library for the Blind). Within this workshop, a series of activities and interviews were designed and implemented with the intention of uncovering students' spatial funds of knowledge when learning literal/physical uses of three English prepositions, namely "in," "at," and "on". The activities and interviews also explored whether students used their original spatial funds of knowledge when learning metaphorical uses of these prepositions and if their use of spatial imagery changed throughout the learning activities. Over the course of approximately half a year, it soon became clear that the students construed mental images of space when learning both literal/physical and metaphorical uses of these prepositions. This research could inform a new approach to inclusive language education using pedagogical methods that are relevant and accessible to students with visual impairments.

Keywords : EFL, funds of knowledge, prepositions, spatial cognition, visually impaired students

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