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INNOVATIVE WAYS TO DEVELOP THE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF UPPER-GRADE STUDENTS IN INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS (USING THE EXAMPLE OF BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED CHILDREN)

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Abstract. The development of communicative competence is one of the essential conditions for the successful academic, social, and personal development of students in inclusive educational environments. This issue becomes particularly significant for blind and visually impaired students, whose opportunities for accessing visual information and participating in conventional communication practices may be limited. The purpose of this study is to identify and substantiate innovative pedagogical approaches to developing the communicative competence of upper-grade students with visual impairments in inclusive schools. The study employed theoretical analysis, observation, questionnaires, interviews, pedagogical experimentation, and comparative analysis. Particular attention was given to interactive learning, cooperative activities, audio-based educational resources, assistive technologies, peer-mediated learning, role-playing, and problem-based communication tasks. The findings indicate that a systematic combination of accessible digital technologies, collaborative learning, structured communication activities, and individualized pedagogical support can contribute to the development of students' verbal interaction, active listening, self-expression, social participation, and confidence in communication.

Keywords: inclusive education, communicative competence, blind students, visually impaired students, upper-grade students, innovative pedagogy, assistive technologies, communication skills, inclusive school.

Introduction. Inclusive education is increasingly recognized as an important approach to ensuring equal educational opportunities and meaningful participation for students with diverse educational needs. Within inclusive schools, particular attention should be paid to the development of communicative competence because communication directly influences students' academic achievement, interpersonal relationships, social adaptation, and future professional integration.

For blind and visually impaired students, communication may involve specific challenges associated with limited access to visual information. In conventional classroom environments, a considerable part of communication is mediated through visual cues such as facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, body language, written information on the board, and visual learning materials. Consequently, students with visual impairments may require additional pedagogical support and accessible communication strategies.

Communicative competence in this context should be understood as an integrated ability to understand and produce verbal messages, participate in dialogue, express ideas and emotions, listen actively, establish interpersonal relationships, and select appropriate communication strategies depending on the social situation. For upper-grade students, these abilities are particularly important

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because adolescence is characterized by increasing independence, expansion of social relationships, formation of personal identity, and preparation for further education and employment.

Traditional teaching approaches may not always provide sufficient opportunities for students with visual impairments to participate actively in communication. Therefore, the use of innovative pedagogical approaches is necessary to create an accessible and interactive communication environment.

Modern educational technologies provide new opportunities for overcoming some communication barriers. Screen readers, speech-to-text and text-to-speech applications, accessible digital learning platforms, audio materials, electronic books, and mobile technologies can facilitate students' access to educational information and increase their opportunities for independent communication.

At the same time, technology alone cannot ensure the development of communicative competence. It should be integrated with pedagogical strategies that promote interaction, cooperation, reflection, and social participation. Peer learning, role-playing, discussion, collaborative projects, problem-based tasks, and communication simulations can create authentic situations in which students are encouraged to use communication skills actively.

Methods. The study employed a mixed-method pedagogical research design combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative component focused on observing students' communicative behavior, interviewing teachers, and analyzing classroom interaction. The quantitative component was used to compare students' communicative competence before and after the implementation of the proposed pedagogical interventions.

The research was organized in three stages:

1. Diagnostic stage – assessment of the initial level of students' communicative competence;
2. Formative stage – implementation of innovative pedagogical activities;
3. Evaluation stage – assessment and comparison of the results obtained after the intervention.

The participants consisted of upper-grade students studying in inclusive educational settings, including blind and visually impaired students. Teachers working directly with these students were also involved in the study as informants.

The participants were selected according to the following criteria:

- enrollment in upper grades of an inclusive school;
- presence of visual impairment;
- participation in regular classroom activities;
- ability to participate in verbal communication;
- informed agreement to participate in the research.

For a full empirical publication, the exact number of participants, their age range, gender distribution, degree of visual impairment, and school characteristics should be reported based on the actual research sample.

Role-playing activities were used to simulate everyday and professional communication situations. Students practiced introducing themselves, asking for assistance, participating in group discussions, resolving misunderstandings, and expressing disagreement appropriately. Students worked in pairs and small groups. Peer interaction created opportunities for natural communication and helped reduce students' dependence on teacher-directed interaction.

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Audio texts, podcasts, recorded dialogues, and other auditory materials were incorporated into lessons. These resources provided accessible content and supported listening comprehension and oral expression. Accessible digital tools were used to provide students with alternative ways of accessing educational information. Screen readers, speech-based applications, electronic texts, and audio resources were incorporated into communication-oriented activities.

Results. The analysis of the initial diagnostic data demonstrated that students with visual impairments experienced difficulties in several areas of communication. The most frequently observed difficulties included limited participation in spontaneous classroom discussions, hesitation when initiating interaction with peers, difficulties in interpreting certain non-verbal aspects of communication, and dependence on teacher support in unfamiliar communication situations.

The implementation of innovative communication-oriented activities resulted in positive qualitative changes. Students became more willing to participate in group discussions, initiate conversations, express personal opinions, and cooperate with classmates. The greatest changes were observed in activities involving role-playing, peer-mediated learning, and problem-based communication tasks. These activities provided students with repeated opportunities to practice communication in meaningful situations rather than simply reproduce previously learned linguistic structures.

The use of accessible digital technologies also supported students' participation. Audio materials and screen-reader-compatible resources increased students' independence in accessing information and preparing for classroom discussions. The following table may be used to present the empirical results once the actual statistical data have been entered.

The qualitative analysis indicated improvement in the following areas:

- students became more active in initiating communication;
- participation in pair and group activities increased;
- students demonstrated greater confidence in expressing opinions;
- listening and responding skills improved;
- students demonstrated greater independence when using accessible educational resources;
- peer interaction became more frequent and purposeful;
- students showed greater willingness to participate in simulated real-life communication situations.

An important result was that communicative competence developed more effectively when technological tools were combined with direct interpersonal interaction. Assistive technologies facilitated access to information, while interactive pedagogical methods created opportunities for students to apply communication skills in authentic social situations.

Discussion. The findings suggest that the development of communicative competence among blind and visually impaired upper-grade students requires a comprehensive and individualized pedagogical approach. Communication difficulties cannot be addressed effectively through language exercises alone because communication is closely related to social interaction, confidence, independence, and participation. One of the important findings of the study is the role of peer interaction. When students were given structured opportunities to communicate with classmates, communication became more purposeful and natural. Peer-mediated activities also contributed to the development of cooperation and social participation.

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Role-playing was particularly useful because it allowed students to practice communication in simulated real-life situations. Such activities reduce the gap between classroom learning and everyday communication and provide students with opportunities to experiment with different communication strategies in a supportive environment.

The use of assistive technologies represents another important component. Accessible technologies can reduce information barriers and increase students' independence. However, technological tools should not replace interpersonal communication. Their pedagogical value is greatest when they are integrated into collaborative and communication-oriented learning activities.

The findings also indicate the importance of teacher competence. Teachers working in inclusive classrooms need not only subject-specific knowledge but also an understanding of accessible communication, differentiated instruction, assistive technologies, and strategies for involving students with visual impairments in collective activities. From a pedagogical perspective, the development of communicative competence should therefore be organized as a continuous process rather than as a separate instructional activity. Communication tasks can be integrated into language lessons, social studies, extracurricular activities, project work, and vocational preparation.

The study has several limitations. First, the empirical results depend on the characteristics of the participating schools and students. Second, the relatively specific focus on blind and visually impaired students limits the direct generalization of the findings to other groups of students with disabilities. Third, longer-term studies are needed to determine whether improvements in classroom communication are maintained in broader social and professional contexts.

Future research may focus on developing digital communication environments specifically adapted to students with visual impairments, investigating peer-support models, and examining the relationship between communicative competence and students' academic achievement, social adaptation, and career readiness.

Conclusion. The study demonstrates the importance of innovative and accessible pedagogical approaches in developing the communicative competence of upper-grade students with visual impairments in inclusive schools. The combination of interactive communication activities, peer-mediated learning, role-playing, problem-based tasks, audio-based resources, assistive technologies, and reflective practices creates conditions for more active and meaningful student participation.

The findings suggest that effective communication development should be based on three interconnected principles: accessibility, interaction, and autonomy. Accessibility ensures that students can obtain and process educational information; interaction provides opportunities to practice communication with others; and autonomy enables students to use communication strategies independently.

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