

Volunteers Training for Audio Description Service within the Sochi 2014 Project as Exemplified by Activity of the Russian State Social University Volunteer Center: Research and Findings

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Abstract

Background/Objective: Paralympic Winter Games in Sochi 2014 presented a unique opportunity to use the world's leading experience in the integration of persons with disabilities into the productive life of Russian society through the implementation of a special program for volunteer training – Audio Description commentators for Games. The presented article is based on the practical experience of the Russian State Social University Volunteer Center, attracting volunteers in various “events” – projects and activities involving persons with disabilities and contains the research results of training Audio Description service volunteers in the framework of Sochi 2014 Project as exemplified by the Center activities. **Methods:** The paper presents new, modern technique of teaching Audio Description commentators-volunteers which is capable of giving an impetus to the development of a new aspect of social TV and radio. This technique allows acquiring the knowledge and practical experience of interaction with the target group at which Audio Description is aimed; revealing the Audio Description basic properties and principles; gaining practical interaction experience through direct Audio Description; acquiring and working out the skills and the ability to practically describe any kind of objects at Audio Description; simulating situations as close as possible to real commenting Olympic events. **Findings:** The article analyzes the results of empirical research of the personal characteristics of today's volunteers-Audio Description commentators, practical recommendations are given aimed at improving the efficiency of the selection process in volunteer practice that improves the quality of Audio Description service. Such an integrated approach in the training of volunteers-Audio Description commentators was used for the first time and demonstrated high performance. **Application/Improvements:** The practical significance of the study lies in the fact that its conclusions and recommendations can be used in the course of professional psychological selection and psychopedagogical support of training, retraining and analysis of volunteers-Audio Description commentators' activities.

Keywords: Audio Description, Integration, Persons with Disabilities, Volunteer, Volunteering

1. Introduction

Sochi 2014 project is a unique comprehensive program for the integration of people with disabilities into the life

of Russian society. The program is worked out taking into account the basic provisions of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted by the UN General Assembly and ratified by the State Duma of

the Russian Federation as of May 3, 2012, as well as the Constitution and other laws of our country. The main task of the organizers of the Games in Sochi was not only to attract attention and increase knowledge about Paralympic Movement of the Russian, but also a radical change in the attitude of Russian society towards persons with disabilities in the Russian Federation, the formation of the necessary barrier-free space.

Games organizers have developed a set of measures necessary for the formation of a new social service by volunteers regarding persons with disabilities – Audio Description of sporting events. This service was aimed at the elimination of visual information barriers in obtaining socially significant information, in the realization of the legitimate rights of the blind and visually impaired to information provision. There are foreign studies on the contribution of volunteers to the organization of international sports events, the economic benefits of their work as in the case of the Olympic Games in Athens, Vancouver, Beijing and London. These research findings are typical and they are similar – volunteers are a strong state economy factor in the organization of the Olympic Games, the contribution of volunteers is vast¹⁻⁴.

Audio Description is the target information, specially prepared for the blind (the visually impaired) to replace or provide additional visual information that a sighted person can see, but that is because of the blindness is not available (or not easily accessible) to the blind (the visually impaired). This service is a kind of analogue of the sign language for the deaf; it eliminates discrimination against sight-impaired persons in overcoming information/communication barriers⁵.

2. Method

In order to prepare the Audio Description service for the participants and guests of the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic and Paralympic Games autonomous non-profit organization Organizing Committee Sochi 2014 in conjunction with the Volunteer Center of the Russian State Social University has launched a special program to train volunteers-Audio Description commentators for Games. Service for commenting Ceremonies of the Games, taking into account peculiarities of information perception by blind people was prepared and carried out according to the requirements of the Accessibility Guide – An Inclusive Approach to the Olympic and Paralympic Games (2013):

“The system of sound amplification together with a loud sound and Audio Description of various artistic elements will help people with sensory impairments (hearing loss, deafness, blindness, visual impairment) to get a full impression of the ceremony)”⁶.

The selection was made in accordance with the established criteria and qualification requirements to Audio Description commentators. Recommendations⁷ Head of Rehabilitation of Blind and Visually Impaired Sector at Reakomp Institute, were taken as a basis for these criteria:

- Willing to work with people who have particular visual perception.
- Skills: Clear diction, expressive speech, the richness of the language, standard speech; knowledge of the peculiarities of perception of the blind, the ability to briefly express their observations and thoughts.
- The third criterion relates to the individual characteristics of the individual candidates to volunteers-Audio Description commentators, including requirements for certain behaviors, response and level of development of complex cognitive abilities and higher mental functions^{8,9}.

As a result, all of the professional qualities of the volunteers-Audio Description commentators were reduced to 5 groups:

- Observation.
- The ability to select the most important in the visual image and edit speech.
- Standard Russian language, brevity of expression.
- Correct usage of tone of voice, avoiding hypocrisy in the Russian speech melody.
- The ability to see and interpret what they see.

To determine the personal characteristics and competencies of volunteers nominated for candidates to Audio Description commentators were interviewed and pre-employment testing using methods that allow an assessment of speech and voice parameters (rate, literacy, dialogueness, kindness, emotion, strength of voice, expressiveness, clarity of pronunciation); concentration and stability of attentiveness; the level and speed of thought; properties of short term memory and mobility of nervous processes; level of emotional and psychological stability of the candidate^{10,11}.

As a result of interviews and psychological tests enabling to establish appropriate candidates tendencies to work as Audio Description commentators, 12 and domestic volunteers from without and from within were selected from Russian State Social University Volunteer Center activists.

Organization of the educational process of volunteers-Audio Description commentators was a combination of different forms of educational activities: Lectures, seminars, trainings, role plays and practical classes. The system of control of knowledge, skills and abilities of the student envisages carrying out interim assessment in the form of credits at the end of the study of certain subjects and the final certification in the form of a credit. Successful completion of training was confirmed by the corresponding document. Professional sports commentators and experts in speech technology were among the teachers^{12,13}.

The total duration of training was 32 academic hours.

The aim of the course is teaching skills and abilities necessary to direct Audio Description commentary of Sochi 2014 Games events.

Objectives of the course are as follows:

- To consider the main features of perception of information by blind and visually impaired people.
- To consider the concept and the basic principles of Audio Description.
- To identify the key knowledge, skills and acquirements that Audio Description commentator should have.
- To work out in practice and consolidate the received information on the Audio Description commentator.
- To design and analyze Audio Description commentator's work in conditions close to real.

This course differs from the standard Audio Description commentator training because for the first time Audio Description participants did not only have to know and learn how to describe events in view of Audio Description features, but also to implement these skills and acquirements in a specific format, such as opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games. In addition, when commenting the Olympic events, Audio Description commentator needs to perform two functions, in addition to the actual audio description, a sports commentator's function is added. In addition, during the preparation of teaching material

the dynamics and diversity of Audio Description events were taken into account which as opposed to the video materials can often be unpredictable^{14,15}.

Considering everything mentioned above, as well as the former Audio Description commentator teaching experience, the program course was composed of several modules.

The first general theoretical module includes the peculiarities of perception of the environment and the events by blind and visually impaired persons. At this stage, the elements of training, as well as demonstrating the various elements of the audio and tactile perception were used. While considering the material, the emphasis was made on the auditory canal as the main one for the perception of Audio Description.

Next theoretical module had as a task the consideration of the concepts and fundamental principles of Audio Description. In this part of the course the Audio Description commentary properties were described and demonstrated that allows making the perception of the material for the blind, as close as possible to the perception of the audience without visual deprivation.

The third module of the program is intended for practical work with video materials, whose task was to consider and to work out practical steps of Audio Description. This topic includes skills of describing shapes of Audio Description objects, their actions and interactions. Materials that fully meet the requirements for the description of this kind of information were prepared for this part of the program.

A set of interactive group exercises became an important stage of the program. Performing these exercises, both in the classroom and on their own, training participants learn to effectively communicate with each other in the commentary process. Besides, the program included exercises helping develop a clear and concise wording when describing the visual material of varying degrees of complexity.

The final module of the program consisted of a simulation of the real conditions, close to the Audio Description situation of Olympic and Paralympic events. Various kinds of video materials, including records of the competition, opening and closing ceremonies of the previous Olympic Games were also used for this purpose. At this stage of training, the participants could try out different models of interaction and identify most appropriate for them, reveal the main difficulties in the

course of work with this kind of format, as well as observe their colleagues' work and share the obtained experience.

In the framework of volunteers training a training course on "sports commenting" was also provided, which was carried out in two directions: Theoretical and practical.

The lectures included the following main topics: the place of sports commentator in the modern world, the method of preparation for sports commenting, commentator's psychology, literacy and the ability to get out of difficult situations, the analysis of kinds of sports and differences in their comments, discussion and analysis of popular commentators' work.

During training, students attended lectures on the following specialties: Speech technology (16 hrs), Psychology of communication (4 hrs), Training and strengthening the vocal apparatus (8 hrs), Commentator and the audience communication technology (12 hrs). Modern sports comments peculiarities (24 hrs), Features of work in Live (16 hrs), Sports commentator's mastery (24 hrs).

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3. Results

Learning outcomes include:

- Knowledge and practical experience of interaction with the target group have been obtained at which Audio Description is directed.
- The main Audio Description characteristics and principles have been disclosed.
- Practical interaction experience through direct Audio Description has been gained.
- Skills and abilities to describe any kind of objects under Audio Description have been considered, understood and worked out in practice.
- Situations most closely approximated to a real commenting of Olympic events have been simulated.

As the basis of practical exercises on commenting, a new

technique has been developed which provides connection of traditional commentary (not just a sports one) with Audio Description features. The latter involves a specially prepared form of communication for the blind (visually impaired) persons to replace (or supplement) visual information, which is perceived by the sighted and is not available (or not easily accessible) because of blindness to the blind (visually impaired) persons. A number of studies have been conducted with the participation of the teacher on Audio Description. As a result, the training teaching staff came to the conclusion that for the first time in the history of this service of significant representation of the sport, a new balanced scheme of two kinds of comments will be found. The wishes of Audio Description specialist were especially taken into account through which media-guides will be able to visualize information for the blind participants of celebrations of the Winter Olympic Games in the most comfortable way. Much attention is paid to the Paralympic component of future Games.

4. Discussion

The main objective of this course was the ability to not only comment on the action, but also to prepare the materials that will be needed to fill the media guides performances during the Olympic Games.

Workshops were conducted and the following tasks were carried out during the training:

- Address of the audience with the release of the Olympic news, through which there was a dipping into the atmosphere of the preparation of the Olympic Games.
- The formal protocol rituals of opening and closing of the Olympic Games, required for the program, were studied.
- The main historical facts related to the Olympic and Paralympic Movement were studied with in-depth study of namely the Winter Games. The main facts that are relevant to future ceremonies will be further systematized in the form of a note to the guide.
- By reference to the potential participants of opening and closing of the Games, the audience did a lot of work to find and systematize information on potential creative and sport participants for future ceremonies. In the final sessions a note was created with the most important information which the commentators were able to use during the ceremony.

- Workshops on the art of interviewing were conducted: “How to talk to people?”, “How to get the necessary information and how to use it during the ceremony?”
- Training-commenting of the actual opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic Winter Games and Paralympic Winter Games in Vancouver 2010 was conducted.

Particular attention was paid to the “Speech Image. Speech Technology” aspect, in terms of which classes and workshops aimed at the development of vocal apparatus activity, efficient use of speech capacity, development of the ability to master voice using its various tonal possibilities, development of the ability to master vocal apparatus as a whole were conducted.

The training resulted in each student’s preparation of personal reference materials that have been successfully applied in practice during the Audio Description on the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Sochi. The total number of students was about 2 thousand persons, including people with visual impairment. Spectators and athletes can listen to commentary in English and Russian languages through a special device. The device was made by order of the Organizing Committee with the allocated frequencies.

5. Conclusion

Thus, at the end of the training course, participants have been acquainted with techniques, technical equipment and Audio Description software, with the main requirements to a specialist – a qualified Audio Description commentator, the ethics of Audio Description commentator, the methods of speech technology, verbal descriptions of various images, attention concentration and monitoring, maintaining the productivity of the voice system, rules establishing the pronunciation norms and contributing to improving the efficiency of Audio Description commentator. Volunteers together with teachers – Pavel Obiukh, head of the group of the blind, coach and Nikolay Pivnenko, TV presenter, actor, sports commentator, developed new, modern teaching methods of Audio Description, which are able to give an impetus to the development of a new aspect of social TV and radio.

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