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Languages and SEN

David Wilson discusses the importance of meeting SEN at the modern foreign language classroom door

A couple of decades have elapsed since the original National Curriculum entitled every secondary school student in England and Wales to follow a course of five years' duration in one modern foreign language (MFL). This new policy of "MFL for all" also meant that students with SEN now attended French, German or Spanish lessons, instead of "remedial" teachers withdrawing them to individual or small-group literacy and numeracy development classes.

In the early 1990s, several projects successfully piloted language teaching to students with SEN. A strategic difference between ordinary and special schools, and between MFL specialists and specialist teachers of pupils with SEN, soon emerged. In each case, the first group began with the demands of the subject, the second with the individual needs of the particular student. Effective MFL learning for all students with SEN was found to require a skilful and sensitive combination of both approaches. According to a recent European Commission report on languages and special needs, one headmaster attributed the successful introduction of French into his special school

to a conviction that "the only 'disabling' conditions that our pupils have are low expectations and assumptions made by adults."

Keep it simple, stupid

Some may argue against students with SEN learning MFL on the grounds of relevance and difficulty. On the first point, we live in a world where most people, including those with SEN, speak at least two languages. In Europe, native speakers of German outnumber speakers of English as a home language. Greater international mobility for business or pleasure brings more Britons than ever into contact with speakers of languages other than English. Many different home languages are spoken within the UK itself.

As for difficulty, MFL teachers working with students with SEN may well reflect on their own experiences while they were engaged on mastering their subject. I once found myself grinding to a halt in a university language laboratory in France

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where I was expected to memorise, as well as transform, thirty-word pattern drills from the present to the imperfect tense. The moral is that any student accustomed to one method of learning a language may well have difficulty when switching to another method.

The core and foundation subjects of the National Curriculum, from Art and Design to Science, are neither easy nor difficult in themselves. What is taught during lessons in the subject, the content and how it is taught, can and does decide whether a student experiences success or failure. The acronym KISS, "keep it simple, stupid", represents prudent advice to MFL teachers working with vulnerable students with limited reasoning powers and damaged self-esteem.

Subject matter is best delivered in "bite-size chunks" to avoid mental indigestion. Teaching should be paced to accommodate the learners' strengths. Students with SEN will often admit that they prize their teacher's ability to explain harder concepts, breaking them down into single manageable steps, more highly than they do their teacher's ability to amuse and entertain. If a grammar point proves inaccessible, it may be taught "lexically" by practising a

phrase illustrating the usage. Although many teachers take years to master the fine art of differentiation, this skill can work wonders. A judicious mix of teacher-led, group work, individual, computer-based and other activities also ensures variety and SEN-focused MFL lessons.

Know your charges

These days, all teachers are expected to be reflective practitioners, graduating eventually from apprentices to masters of teaching and learning. Every teacher has become a special needs teacher too. Learners with SEN are ubiquitous, not only in the so-called "bog-standard comprehensives" but also in the most prestigious bastions of scholarship. If the channels of communication between MFL and SEN professionals remain open and bi-directional, the former will benefit from expert advice and knowledge of the child's SEN history, while the latter will be better placed to monitor the delivery of the same child's entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum.

Educational inclusion in general, and SEN in particular, is about more than cognitive and learning difficulties. Other categories of SEN, whether behavioural, emotional and social difficulties, communication and interaction difficulties or sensory and physical difficulties, also have implications for the MFL teacher. While wheelchair-bound students may otherwise excel in Spanish, they must have the shelved dictionaries and reference books they need within their reach. A candidate with hearing impairment may be entitled to access arrangements in

GCSE MFL examinations. A group of Year 7 students being taught the French greeting "Bonjour" while shaking hands

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with classmates may contain someone with autistic spectrum disorders who will be severely distressed by the idea of making physical contact with another person.

The ingenuity of learners with SEN, sometimes doing the right things for the wrong reasons in MFL, cannot be underestimated. In one commercial French computer game, the presentation activity displayed a town plan with named streets and places identified solely by symbols. A native speaker and an on-screen message invited the player to "Choisissez une image, cliquez, écoutez et répétez...". Clicking the mouse pointer over the icon of a building flying the tricolour elicited the spoken and written explanation "C'est l'hôtel de ville". The player was then expected to select and drag each of the place symbols from the right of the screen to its correct location on the map: "Écoutez et mettez le symbole au bon endroit". If the town hall icon was selected, the message "L'hôtel de ville est sur la Place du Marché" was heard but not seen. When the player released the icon over one of the ten map locations, now identified by large dots, either "Faux" or "Bravo, un point" was heard.

I once demonstrated the presentation and the practice stages of the unit. A boy,

who had formerly displayed behaviour problems, was so intrigued that he insisted on playing the game on his own in several subsequent lessons. However, as I watched him, I noticed that he ignored every spoken French clue in the game. He relied instead on his photographic memory of the locations of the church, post office, café, tourist office, town hall, supermarket, stadium, school,

railway station and swimming pool from the presentation phase. Listening comprehension is reputedly the least liked and developed skill in MFL learning. Learners, particularly those with SEN, will compensate for this weakness by enlisting their comparative strengths, in this case spatial awareness. It is always prudent to observe students with SEN at work and to verify their success! ■

Further information

David Wilson taught French, German and students with SEN at Harton Technology College, South Shields. His website provides a wealth of information about MFL and SEN:

www.specialeducationalneeds.com

An extensive bibliography of the literature on the subject is available at:

www.specialeducationalneeds.com/mfl/biblio.doc

Hilary McColl's site, "devoted to modern foreign language learning and inclusion", is at:

www.hilarymccoll.co.uk