

IN THIS EDITION

Three Reasons why I teach Phonetics

by Marianne Jordan (Page 5)

Making a case for collaborative writing in the L2 classroom

by Susanna Wickes (Page 7)

Shining the Spotlight on Drama in the Classroom

by Shona McDonald (Page 9)

The Impact of Teacher Cognition in Very Young Learner Pedagogy

by Shay Coyne (Page 12)

Materials adaptation begins with materials evaluation

by Touria Jouilla (Page 14)

L1 in the English Classroom

by Barbara Hernandez (Page 17)

SEN in the English language classroom

by Damian Cunniffe (Page 19)

Supporting experimenting in junior centres

by Laura O'Grady (Page 21)

Considerations in Teacher Development

by Christohper Farrell (Page 24)

The pedigree of learner autonomy

by Peter Lahiff (Page 26)

No. 3

17th February 2017

ELT Ireland features (Pages 1-3 & 29-30)

Welcome to our Third Bulletin

by Dr. Lou McLaughlin

Recipe for a good ELTed talk by Peter Lahiff

Meeting Up with managers by Joanne Mitten

Newsletter know-how by Ben Dobbs

Acknowledgements by the Editor

The Glastonbury of Grammar by James Duggan

Write for the next ELT Ireland Bulletin!

11 ideas for getting yourself published

info.eltireland@gmail.com @ELTIreland

elt-ireland.com

SEN in the English language classroom

by **Damian Cunniffe** (Atlantic Language Galway)

Special education needs (SEN) applies to learners who have physical, sensory, emotional or behavioural issues which, as Marie Delaney states, results in them having a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of learners of the same age (Delaney,2016). We in Ireland have made significant strides forward in recognising the need to make teachers aware of SEN in the primary and post-primary classroom but it is only recently that these same criteria are being applied to the language classroom. In conversation with several EL teachers, I found that some felt they had an understanding of SEN whereas others suggested that they would have benefited from more preparation in the subject in the early stages of their CELT



training.

Inclusivity is key to our approach to special educational needs.

Pic by Pixabay

Classifications of SEN

Perhaps some difficulties arise from the fact that learners with SEN present in such diverse and varied ways. Teachers often have to deal with a learner who shows signs of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) but has either not been diagnosed with these conditions or the language school has not been informed by the parents or agents that the learner has these conditions. There is a good reason for this. Parents especially may fear that their child will be turned away if they report their child's condition to the school and therefore on many occasions the teacher is presented with a SEN learner without any prior knowledge of their special need. While it can be said that each classification of SEN in its way presents challenges for teachers, in cases of sensory impairment or certain medical conditions, which affect learners physically, these conditions are most often reported to the school prior to the learner attending, thus giving the school and the teacher time to prepare and adapt their lessons accordingly. Whatever the circumstance, the onus is on the school and most often on the teacher to cater for SEN learners as best they can, however teachers often feel that they are not sufficiently equipped to teach SEN learners.

Teachers

Dr. Elsa Cardenas-Hagan discusses the importance of the teacher's role in SEN areas. She advocates the importance of deciding on what teaching approach to take when teaching SEN learners and insists that "the attitude of the teacher is vital for the successful integration of a SEN learner into the mainstream language classroom". The importance of preparation is paramount. An understanding of the limitations of the SEN learner is important but also the teachers understanding of the limitations of their teaching style is also central to the pedagogical relationship. Teachers need to be able and willing to adapt to their learners. ("Addressing ELLs' Language Learning And Special Education Needs: Questions And Considerations I Colorín Colorado"). Marie Delaney also outlines the importance of a teacher's attitude to SEN teaching. Positivity is important as is a willingness to learn from the learners (Delaney, 2016. 13). In many cases learners come with their own coping mechanisms so where possible communication with parents, schools and the learner themselves can assist teachers in putting a coherent programme of education together.

Many mainstream second level schools in Europe equip their learners with an individual education plan (IEP). Where available this can give a teacher valuable information about their learners prior to them attending a language school classroom.

Institutional preparation and awareness

On occasions where learners needs have not been communicated to the language schools prior to the arrival of a learner, it is important that the institutions have a backup plan and that lines of communication with agents, parents and educational organisations in the learners' native country are kept open. Unfortunately even when these structures are in place, things can go wrong, primarily when dealing with issues such as cultural differences and the logistical issue of distance between countries. This is where the resourcefulness of teachers and their schools come into play.

A case in point

In 2015, I taught a learner whose sight was profoundly impaired. Not having taught a visually impaired learner before, I was apprehensive that I could do him justice and be successful in integrating him into a class of ten fully sighted learners. I found that though I adapted my teaching subtly at first in an effort to try to cater to the sensitivities of the learner, even skirting around the issue of his SEN, I soon felt that I was doing him a disservice. For two days, only the obvious needs of this learner were catered for i.e making sure he got to class ok and assuring that he was seated in an area of the classroom with few obstacles if he should need to leave and the only changes I made to my normal lesson routine were to vocalise all instructions, speaking aloud all words that I wrote on the board letter by letter. I knew on the second day that this approach was not working. The issue of the learners' SEN was creating a tension in the classroom; not caused by the SEN learner himself but by the fact that I was, however well intentioned, not openly and directly addressing his needs. I therefore decided, in consultation with the learner, to address his learning needs in a more open way emphasising the normality of difference rather than it being unusual. This simple change helped the SEN learner to relax and all the learners to engage with each other on an equal footing. Teaching became easier as I could address the learner directly for clarification and to ensure that I was doing the right thing to get my lesson objectives across for all students and not just for him. What I had not realised initially was that by trying to ignore the difference between him and his peers I was essentially excluding him from the class. I had labelled him without saying a word.

“This simple change helped the SEN learner to relax and all the learners to engage with each other on an equal footing.”

Some techniques for the classroom

In the past SEN learners were omitted from the mainstream classroom and differences were treated as abnormal and 'other'. In most countries now the model has changed to one of inclusion where the schools, the curriculum and the teachers are encouraged to adapt to the needs of the learners and not the other way round. The idea is that stakeholders engage with SEN learners in an effort to normalise the learning process.

SEN learners are often encouraged to discuss their SEN so as to normalise it. Naturally this approach would depend upon the learner in question and could be done in tandem with activities based around learners getting to know each other, finding their strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, etc. The idea would be to nurture empathy within the classroom environment highlighting that differences are the norm not the exception.

Due to the fact that many language learners are on a short stay in schools, it is often not practical to develop a detailed plan for each learner. However, practical applications should always be considered, e.g. the seating arrangements for visually impaired learners in the classroom so they can easily access their seats and the doorway without too many obstacles; the possibility of supplying ADHD or ASD learners with the opportunity to opt out in cases where sensory overload is apparent. There are a myriad of classroom management options that can be explored but in the end it comes

“Teachers need to be able and willing to adapt to their learners.”

down to the individual teacher to organise their classroom as they see fit. Though tasks may need to be adapted to suit SEN learners these tasks need not be exclusive and should if at all possible be tweaked to include all learners.

Think about the tools you may need. For a range of SEN learners such as those with ASD, visuals, roadmaps and clear and timely instruction can aid in the learning process. The additional benefits to this would also be in adding an extra dimension to non-SEN learners learning and may also help develop teacher's organisational and instructive skills; so it can be win-win for all involved.

In the end the teacher is the most important cog in the classroom and learners place a lot of trust in them. SEN teaching can be challenging. Teachers need to approach the challenge with an air of positivity and an open mind but most importantly with the ability to see beyond the special need to the person underneath. SEN teaching is not

for everyone but it is a very rewarding and if approached in the correct manner can really open the eyes and improve a teacher's skills overall.

Further reading

De"Addressing Ells' Language Learning And Special Education Needs: Questions And Considerations I Colorin Colorado". Colorincolorado.org. N.p., 2016. Web. 19 Dec. 2016. Janey, Marie. Special Educational Needs. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Print.