

Language learning and students with special educational needs

David Wilson, Specialeducationalneeds.com

Why is it important for learners with special educational needs to learn languages?

Over twenty years have elapsed since the British government introduced a National Curriculum for England and Wales requiring all 11-to-14-year-olds, including those with “learning difficulties”, to follow a modern foreign language course. This “entitlement”, as it became known, was due to be extended to all 14-to-16-year-olds at a later date. Underlying this policy of languages for all in the 11-16 age group was a recognition that the United Kingdom could compete more successfully in Europe and world-wide if the country discarded its image as a nation of monoglots.

In 1988 the then European Community’s Ministers of Education had also agreed to make language learning the key to education for European citizenship. Another factor promoting “languages for all” was equality of educational opportunity. For much of the twentieth century, British foreign language learning had remained the virtual preserve of an academic élite. The entitlement of all 11-to-16-year-olds to study a foreign language signalled a new determination to include every school-age student in mainstream education.

Now we are in the second decade of the new millennium, the Equality Act 2010 legally protects people, including those with special educational needs (SEN) or disabilities, from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society. This legislation also reinforces every school student’s right to a broad and balanced education, including a foreign language entitlement, with additional provision and access arrangements where necessary to support learning and assessment. The importance of MFL for all school students, both SEN and non-SEN, can only be enhanced by the subject’s extension to primary education, special schools and the English Baccalaureate, which parallels similar inclusive educational measures in Germany and elsewhere.

What are the challenges?

Challenges are just problems remaining to be solved. When the going got rough, my parents were fond of quoting the wartime slogan “The difficult we do immediately; the impossible takes a little longer”. Challenges can also be opportunities to learn from experience and to make progress. In the case of SEN, they may lie in ignorance of a student’s “stress trigger point” or inability to read smaller print or to hear a digital audio recording. The solution lies in knowing the student’s educational history better, reading, and acting on, advice issued by the school’s SEN department, which is often based on reports written by an educational psychologist after an in-depth 1-to-1 assessment, and on a mountain of paperwork submitted by the student’s teachers in earlier key stages.

If problems arise when teaching MFL, the method used by the teacher to introduce a particular point may be the cause. After all, when all is said and done, the first sign of SEN is simply a mismatch between what the curriculum expects of the student and what the student brings to the curriculum. Looking back, I can recall some painful moments during my own higher education when my progress almost ground to a halt. When I enrolled on a language laboratory course at a French university during my year abroad in the 1960s, for example, I was asked to listen to thirty-word French sentences and to repeat them, changing the verb from the present to the imperfect tense. Although verb conjugation lay well within my capabilities, repeating the original long sentences, without a written text to aid recall, proved to be a herculean task and I never returned to the language laboratory with its audio-lingual pattern drills. The contrast between the grammar-

translation method, on which I had been brought up, and the audio-lingual approach, with which I was now expected to work, simply led me to fall at the first hurdle.

Another issue can be the student with learning difficulties who manages to select all the right answers for all the wrong reasons. A number of years ago, a boy in one of my French classes scored zero points in a computer-based game requiring the player to listen to instructions in the target language about the location of buildings and, in response, to drag symbols representing those places to wherever they belonged on a town plan. After the corrected answers appeared on the screen, he played the game again and scored full marks. He had succeeded this time round because he had memorised the town plan, his formidable visual memory compensating for his weak listening skills.

Attitude is perhaps the hardest challenge of all. In reference to MFL learning and moderate learning difficulties, a special school head teacher once remarked that “the only ‘disabling’ conditions that our pupils have are low expectations and assumptions made by adults”. Like their non-SEN peers, students with SEN will only reach their full potential if they are given the opportunity to move outside their comfort zone and to learn new skills. Teaming up with a mainstream school MFL department, itself on a steep learning curve, the head teacher in question piloted then introduced French into his special school, the project’s ultimate success winning over the opposition. Risk-taking may be the first step in problem-solving.

What are the benefits?

The great German polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is credited with the maxim “Wer fremde Sprachen nicht kennt, weiß nichts von seiner eigenen” (Those who know nothing of foreign languages know nothing of their own). Teaching target-language grammar in MFL lessons will often involve cross-referencing English usage, while MFL vocabulary development may well begin with a study of English/target language cognates (e.g. night/ nuit / Nacht / noche), reinforcing the common origins of certain European languages. The experience of learning German or Spanish may lead a child struggling with English spelling to realise that some languages come with a transparent orthography. Numeracy too can be enhanced by MFL lessons focusing on number work, where the opportunity arises to solve very simple arithmetic problems.

Students with learning differences or difficulties frequently suffer from poor self-esteem, leading to frustration and disruptive behaviour. Using SEN-friendly strategies, MFL teachers can arrest or even reverse this decline. Such tactics include adopting a multisensory approach, engaging kinaesthetic as well as visual and auditory learning styles; presenting subject matter in a structured and explicit manner; dividing lessons into digestible “bite-size chunks” with slower learning steps; providing opportunities for “over-learning” key points through a variety of follow-up activities; deploying memory strategies to assist vocabulary and grammar retention; making allowances for shorter concentration spans; showing sensitivity when eliciting student responses; encouraging metacognitive – “learning how to learn” – strategies and thinking skills to promote student autonomy; and dispensing praise and rewards to maintain motivation and self-esteem.

There are other benefits. Students identified as having SEN routinely grow up with a sense of being different from their non-SEN peers. However, the study of MFL may lead them to recognise that diversity is a matter for respect and celebration in a world of multiple cultures and languages. Greater mobility nowadays for work and recreation means that families with children with SEN are likelier to travel abroad than previous generations, while technology-based MFL lessons not only widen horizons beyond the local environment but also build valuable ICT skills that can eventually enhance employability after leaving school.

What is currently happening around the country?

[Ofsted’s January 2011 report *Modern Languages: Achievement and Challenge 2007-2010*](#) provides something of an overview of MFL provision countrywide in recent years. When addressing the issue of SEN in MFL classes, the authors paid tribute to teachers’ retention of students on task as well as their use of the target language, digital audio recordings, individual education plans and a wide range of activities within lessons.

Ofsted's findings correlate with my own perceptions of a steady improvement in MFL provision for SEN within schools during the "noughties". While SENCO and Linguanet forum messages voiced a degree of anxiety about matching MFL with SEN at the turn of the millennium, the same discussion groups appeared much more relaxed about the issue ten years later. Indeed, I recall one recent SENCO Forum contributor expressing her reluctance to withdraw students with literacy difficulties from MFL lessons because the methods used by the MFL department were the SEN-friendliest in the school.

Into each life, however, some rain must fall. Reports have appeared in the press and elsewhere about a few head teachers or senior managers "disapplying" the MFL entitlement of students with learning difficulties in their schools so that they can attend special literacy and numeracy booster courses. If the withdrawal of these students is only temporary and they make genuine progress in their basic skills in the meantime, such interventions may ultimately benefit their study of MFL on their return to the subject. For this to be a "win-win" result, senior managers, SENCOs and MFL subject leaders must all be involved in the initial decision-making, and the disapplication of MFL must be strictly time-limited.

Finally, MFL for SEN stands to gain from the roll-out of MFL in primary education, the subject's mandatory study during key stage 3 and its inclusion in the English Baccalaureate, encouraging take-up at key stage 4. The priority given to differentiation of subject delivery across the curriculum in order to meet individual needs has contributed to the development of a canon of excellent practice within MFL, which bodes well for the goal of "foreign language learning for all" at school level.

Can you tell us about some success stories?

Cinema buffs will recall Dustin Hoffman's performance in the 1988 film *Rain Man*, where he brought the "autistic savant" phenomenon to public attention while playing the fictional role of socially inept Raymond Babbit, who possesses extraordinary mathematical skills. Daniel Tammet, a real-life British linguist with high-functioning autism and savant syndrome, is reported to have a command of ten different languages including Icelandic, which he learned in a week for a television documentary. His [Optimnem](#) website offers French and German courses he has written in consultation with native speakers for English-speaking beginners.

At the heart of most success stories about MFL learners with SEN are dedicated teachers who never lose faith in their students' ability, with appropriate support, to fulfil their potential whatever their needs, strengths and weaknesses. The [2005 European Commission report *Special Educational Needs in Europe: the teaching & learning of languages*](#), which can be found online, has plenty of anecdotal evidence celebrating the ability of learners with cognitive, behaviour, communication, sensory and other difficulties to succeed against the odds at MFL in their mainstream and special schools. Also worthy of notice are the promising and prolific hard-data research findings of American psychologists Leonore Ganschow and Richard Sparks, who tired of rubber-stamping foreign language requirement waivers for university applicants with learning disabilities, opting instead to conduct experimental studies to identify and develop dyslexia-friendly methods of MFL instruction.

When I address student teachers of MFL about SEN, I usually end my presentation with a fictional scenario based on true stories my colleagues once told me in the school staffroom: "Wyrethorpe Comprehensive School's annual Open Evening sees anxious parents of Year 6 students circulating the corridors, each seeking an appropriate placement for their children's secondary education. One family pauses outside Mr Jones' classroom, whose walls are festooned with posters of Austria as well as colourful displays of written work. While Mr Watson and his 10-year-old daughter Jade admire the exhibits, Mrs Watson and her 16-year-old son Paul approach Mr Jones. 'I just wanted to say how grateful we are, Mr Jones. We couldn't believe how well Paul did in his GCSE German. He's always had so many problems with his reading and writing in English!' 'I can't take all the credit, Mrs Watson. His Learning Support Assistant Miss Shields helped too by making the lesson easier for Paul to understand, even though she had never studied the language before.' 'We've just been talking to Miss Shields. Two years ago she secretly enrolled in an evening class and passed her own GCSE German at the same time as Paul.' Mrs Watson's son beamed. 'I couldn't have done it without you or

Miss Shields. You both told me over and over again that German wouldn't be hard as long as I kept listening. German is so much easier to spell than English and last year's school trip to Austria brought everything to life! Will you be teaching my little sister a foreign language if she comes here? I hope so. She can't read or write well either – in English.”

How can teachers find out more / get more involved, etc.?

In the Inclusion section of my Specialeducationalneeds.com website I maintain a thematic modern foreign languages and special educational needs bibliography currently listing the titles of over 1700 books and articles in the field. The “MFL for SEN” bookshelf in my study includes Sylvia Edwards' *Modern Foreign Languages for All*, Hilary McColl's *Modern Languages for All*, Sally McKeown's *Meeting SEN in the Curriculum: Modern Foreign Languages*, Elke Schneider and Margaret Crombie's *Dyslexia and Foreign Language Learning*, the *British Journal of Learning Support* special issue on inclusive approaches to teaching foreign languages and the world's first book-length study of the use of ICT in MFL for SEN, *Inclusive Language Education and Digital Technology*, published in May 2013 and edited by Elina Vilar Beltrán, Chris Abbott and Jane Jones. Nobody approaching the professional literature for the first time will find a dearth of applicable printed reading matter.

Sources of information about MFL for SEN also abound online. In addition to data-rich dedicated websites such as Hilary McColl's Languageswithoutlimits.co.uk, there are several discussion forums where experienced MFL and SEN professionals routinely post responses to teachers seeking advice about learners in difficulty. Some, like [SENCO Forum](#), [Linguanet](#) and [FLTeach](#), have been around for many years, accumulating huge message archives where searchers can easily locate classroom-ready solutions. Others, e.g. [MFL Resources](#), [TES Modern Foreign Languages Forum](#) and the MFL for SEN-specific [Languages for All](#) are among the more recent arrivals that are worth joining in order to tap and share expertise. Certain INSET companies offer SEN training for MFL departments, while the Association for Language Learning's annual Language World conference usually includes SEN-related sessions. An online search using the German terms “Sonderpädagogik” (special education) and “Fremdsprachenunterricht” (foreign language teaching) is likely to yield multiple results, benefiting teachers who know the language and serving as a reminder that MFL for SEN is also a matter of concern to educators in continental Europe.

Anyone wishing to pursue a teaching or research interest in MFL learners with SEN can take their first step by reflecting on their own past experiences of MFL learning, recognising those obstacles that threatened their progress and recalling what they did back then to clear such hurdles. A complementary approach to self-analysis involves focusing on a particular student with a diagnosed learning difficulty and exploring ways of improving his/her access to particular subject-matter within the MFL curriculum. Teamwork can help: a school SENCO will be able to extract multidisciplinary advice and information from students' educational histories, while their other subject teachers can be consulted to identify cross-curricular strategies that build on strengths while compensating for weaknesses. Such knowledge and collaboration will equip teacher-researchers not only to provide more targeted support for their “at-risk” charges but also enable them to compile potentially replicable case studies that will benefit their own professional development as well as inform the ongoing work of MFL and SEN departments: a “win-win” situation!