



"The foreign language learner with physical disabilities"

1st PET Discussion, October 2006

Fielded by David Wilson & Sandy Kinvig

Preliminary Reading

<http://www.specialeducationalneeds.com/mfl/mflpd.html>

Topics Covered

- Putting the child first : a child with physical disabilities not a disabled child;
- Making sure we know as much as possible about the children with disabilities in our classes;
- Being aware of Individual Education Plans;
- Using class assistants;
- Using brain gym in our classes;
- Involving parents;
- Understanding / accepting others with physical disabilities through using picture books / literature.

I'll kick off the discussion with a personal anecdote, a little one I'm afraid! It follows with a request for help with a little girl I am just getting to know.

I've not had any experience of working directly with disabled children at a level of education when it appears to require a programme. Though I have had a little taster in my pre-school classrooms.

Two years ago I worked with a small boy, Bruno, who had a problems standing, he used leg supports (on good days!), and as English with pre-school children is very much a get up and move about activity, I was initially very concerned about Bruno's ability to participate. I soon realised that Bruno thought himself no different to any other child, and though he fell down more, (in fact I'm sure he was really made of rubber) he loved our games as much as any other child and would throw himself at me when ever I arrived in the classroom!

Bruno also had a slight speech problem, (it was all connected, but I'm not sure what he had) but managed with English very well. He delighted in using the words and expressions we played with and proudly shared what he had learned at home.

It was my first experience of a disabled child in my classes and I soon realised that I had to treat Bruno like any other child, with the occasional extra hand to help him mover around a little easier, that's all. It was a simple realisation, but an important one. I was also struck at how naturally children accepted Bruno's inability to do every as they did, and at how often they would help him. Wonderful!

I'm not exactly sure of how disabled children are catered for in Portugal, inclusion is hoped for, that I know, but from reading what Sandy has written, it seems the UK is better equipped to deal with disabled children. English in primary is only just taking off, but it would be very interesting to see how many teachers actually had disabled children attending their classes at all.

Now my request for help!

I've just started a class with a little girl who has Cerebral Palsy, (at least the doctors seem to think this is what it is). Her name is Ana Luisa and she's 4 years old. She has no speech and her body movement is reduced. But she sits in our classes, with the auxiliary behind her, holding her up.

She loves the English puppet, who is an orange cat, and strokes him affectionately as well as she can, she also smiles lots. She's able to follow actions and waves in the right places in our hello song.

I'd like to know to what extent I should focus my attention on Ana Luisa? I find I hold her hand more than the other children's, I direct comments at her, cajoling her to participate more than the others - when there is one disabled child in a group of 23 fairly physically normal children I feel I'm not sharing my attention. The children in her class are obviously used to her being with them and don't take much notice of her difficulties. I find it difficult treating her like any other child, because she needs so much physical help. Sandy? Any one? Any thoughts?

Sandie Mourão

During this discussion I will always defer to Sandy, who is the real expert here. My direct contact with foreign language learners with physical disabilities is relatively fleeting, as pupils with such disabilities are extremely rare in my school and seem to cope well with the minimum of help. My field of research is the foreign language learner with special educational needs, however, and I have familiarised myself with the issue of physical disabilities and language learning during my frequent literature searches.

I prefer to talk about "children with physical disabilities" rather than "physically disabled children", although my "politically correct" language does occasionally slip! I do think it's important, though, to emphasise that the issue here is the child who happens to be disabled. We should therefore start with the child as a sentient, complete human being before studying what the implications of their physical disability are. We need to identify strengths first - what can the child do? - before curtailing any classroom activities that may not be feasible in the child's circumstances.

As for Ana Luisa, the child Sandie mentions, I would first read very closely any documentation written about her by the specialists. Although couched in medical terms, you may be able to "read between the lines" and establish what is likely to work educationally. You are fortunate to have an auxiliary collaborating with you and your teamwork will be key to this child's progress. You should consult regularly with the child's parents, who are in the best position to know what this young girl can do. As an experienced teacher, I am sure you have the instincts and the judgement to trial a variety of approaches and to gauge what suits your pupil as an individual as well as a learner of English.

David Wilson

The classroom assistant (luckily you have one) should sit next to Ana Luisa and re-enforce the lesson while you are dealing with the rest of the class. I use word / picture match a lot with my CP pupils and they love it.

Sandy Kinvig

I'd love to consult with parents, but sadly it's a rarity. I only work with Ana Luisa for two 30 minute sessions a week, and though English is part of the pre-school programme in this school, it is unusual for parents to want to talk to me.

I'm lucky, I have the pre-school teacher and the classroom assistant who works with Ana Luisa. Together we are able to help her be an active part of the group. I'm still getting to know her (and the classroom assistant!) and the rest of the group...

Sandy wrote:

<<the classroom assistant (luckily you have one) should sit next to Ana Luisa and re-inforce the lesson while you are dealing with the rest of the class. I use word / picture match a lot with my CP pupils and they love it.>>

Thanks Sandy. I use picture cards with my pre-school groups, but no words. Children in Portugal only begin reading / writing when they are in primary at the age of 6 years. I'll also see if I can get the classroom assistant to do the reinforcing and stop trying to do it so much myself - that's a good idea...

I've just realised you are emphasising the preposition in your advice. Sit next to and not behind! Of course! Sorry bit slow!

But let me explain a little about the classroom. We are all sitting on a carpet on the floor. We use the circle time area to have English, no chairs / tables. This is why Sandra (the assistant) sits behind Ana Luisa, not next to her. But I'll see if we can fit everyone in and Sandra can sit in the circle. Often she is almost cradling Ana L. and whispers in her ear and hugs her, so she's very much part of her (if you see what I mean!). It's little things like moving from behind to next to that we often don't think about!

Sandie Mourão

Could you prop her up with large bean bags (floor size) as it would be more comfortable one of my pupils arrives on a small bed when she gets uncomfortable in her wheel chair.

Sandy Kinvig

USING PICTURE BOOKS

Check out the link, it's got some really good information and if you follow all the links available you'll be there all day...

<http://www.bookmark.org.uk/>

Part of working with children is helping them to accept disability and that's something we can do through using children's literature which includes characters with physical disabilities.

I know of a picture book called <Susan Laughs> by Jeanne Willis and illustrated by Tony Ross, here's the Amazon link if any of you arte interested.

http://www.amazon.co.uk/Susan-Laughs-Jeanne-Willis/dp/0099407566/sr=11/qid=1161089887/ref=sr_1_1/202-2149544-4680669?ie=UTF8&s=books

I've never used this book, but the language is simple and easy and I think would be very suitable for our primary EFL classes.

Sandy / David... Do you use literature which portrays children with disabilities in your classes? Are you able to find literature in other languages which is of use?

Sandie Mourão

I haven't seen much. sometimes there is an occasional passage in a text book but that's about all.

Sandy Kinvig

I haven't seen much. Sometimes there is an occasional passage in a text book but that's about all.

I agree. One or two UK foreign language textbooks introduce characters in wheelchairs, for example, but it does often seem like what we call "tokenism", or political correctness.

At the same time, a book about a boy with an "invisible" disability, autism, has made the best seller list: "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time" by Mark Haddon. It's a very good "read". You can really get inside the mind of the narrator and begin to understand what autism is about. I'm glad I've read the book because we have three pupils with autism within one school year at the school where I teach.

David Wilson

Since there aren't books that portrait children with disabilities, do you use stories at all in your classes and how are they worked with children?

Cris Bento

Using stories with my primary children? Yes, though not as much as I'd like to. I use stories with pre-school children more. Mostly because I use a course book with primary, and there never seems enough time to do much else... Sigh!

Using picture books is an excellent way to motivate children, and by the looks of the list of books available which include children / adults with disabilities, it would be an excellent way to make children more aware of what being disabled is about. It's the illustrations which play such an important role... In Susan laughs, we don't actually see Susan's wheel chair till right at the end of the book, it's very clever.

We are luckier than David and Sandy, as there is more literature out there for us to use, because we want English stuff ... I'm not sure that there is such a selection in other languages.

David I've read <<"The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time" by Mark Haddon.>> Wonderful. I think it's translated into Portuguese too. It's teenage literature I think... But very readable and quite eye opening – my son was 14 when he read it and devoured it too!

Sandie Mourão

I have been reading these messages about picture books and the way they portray children with disabilities and I remembered something that happened in my classes last year. It is not related to picture books or with disabilities, but it is related with the way children deal with the difference.

I was introducing the rooms in the house and my flashcards had children doing specific activities in each room. Some of the images had black children in them. At the beginning, some of my children were quite surprised (maybe because they live in a small village and have never had contact with any black children before), others related it to the black colleagues they had. My black pupils were quite satisfied to see other black children. On the whole, I felt there was a sense of identification, of knowing that we are all different, but we all have similarities.

Vera

Most of the text books we use have children of all nationalities and often articles about life in countries with french connections like Algeria etc

Sandy Kinvig

Never did this before. What to do?

Special educational needs work is never dull. As soon as you think you have developed reliable procedures covering the main areas of need, learning difficulties, autistic spectrum disorders, behaviour difficulties, speech and language needs, visual and hearing impairments, a new arrival comes along with something quite different to deal with.

In such circumstances, I think it's best to pool resources, ideas and strategies with your colleagues. As a special needs teacher, I read all the documentation about a new child and try and put what's there into terms that make sense to my fellow teachers. Such documentation consists of Individual Education Plans, the reports of psychologists and other specialists, notes and comments made by previous teachers. After issuing my colleagues with a relevant summary, I expect them to provide me with feedback about what works, so I can share such information with teachers who are experiencing difficulty when including the child in the lesson.

If you don't have such a "paper trail", then all current teachers coming into contact with the child need to pool their experiences. There's a rather smug and unhelpful saying among certain teachers in the UK: "He or she is all right with me". Underlying the statement is the opinion that other teachers lack the necessary skills to handle a particular child. This is the reverse of collaboration, where teachers share their successes and failures for the benefit of the learner.

In the case of learners with physical difficulties, you need to establish first what their strengths are, what they can do. Challenge them and you may well find that they can do much more than you originally imagined.

David Wilson

You emphasized something I consider very important, if not fundamental. Team work among teachers and specialists that work at schools. There are two 'problems' when it comes to Portuguese schools:

a) Not all schools have this support from specialists, psychologists or others. So most teachers, are in the dark as far as the best techniques, strategies, methodologies to be used. They search online, read documents, but in the end, you always need the specialists help. Most times we base our teaching method in our instincts, which is always a great thing, but not always enough. (I'm not generalizing, this is my experience in the schools I've worked so far. I'm sure there are very good examples out there).

b) Teachers not always work as a team. Each teacher (maybe because they lack the guidance, no time to meet with others, etc), try their own methods and are we really helping children by doing so? Each teacher uses a different method that, most likely, confuses the child.

> In the case of learners with physical difficulties, you need to establish first what their strengths are, what they can do. Challenge them and you may well find that they can do much more than you originally imagined.>

I think this is the key, or one of them, for success. Thanks!

Cris Bento

I completely agree with David about pooling resources and looking at IEPs etc but with a word of caution: before pupils come to us we get info from the medical team regarding who needs an epi-pen for anaphylactic shock, rectal valium 2 minutes after a fit etc which of course we need to know. At the same time, the previous teacher gives a resume of the pupils coming up to secondary. Sometimes we feel very despondent and wonder how we will cope with pupils, who on the surface have more problems than the previous cohort. I tend to ask the pupils to tell me what they can do and build my ideas around what they think they need. Often they are "spot on" If a child has been told that he won't be able to do something, this stays with him-- maybe 6 months down the line he can do it but has never been given the opportunity to try again. Sometimes you just need a range of adapted tools at your disposal so that the pupil can access the curriculum.

Sandy Kinvig

IEPs is Individual Education Plans! Just in case any one was confused!

It's amazing how a teacher can affect a student and the feeling they have of being able / not to do something. One of the objectives of primary EFL here is to give the children a feeling of confidence in language learning – non-EFL teachers are often very critical of primary students'

mistakes and damage their self confidence, often for a long while... I'm constantly battling against this, even in pre-schools:-/

Sandie Mourão

ROLE OF PARENTS

I was wondering what the role of parents is. How often do they come to school to talk with the teacher about their kids? Are they supportive and share with the teacher what they can do at home? Are they available to work with the teachers, pool their knowledge and work as a team?

Cris Bento

I'm going to invite "my" parents to school next week. I've been working with the students for a month now and want to let them know how their children are learning and, especially, what they can do (and not do!) at home, to help the students' learning process.

This surely brings them closer to school, helps them understand some things they might never have thought of, and gets them closer to the teacher, increasing the chance that they will trust us;)

Raquel Coelho

Some parents are cagey about coming to school. If it is your first invitation to them make it informal with coffee and cakes and the possibility of bringing younger siblings if child care is a problem.

Sandy Kinvig

Parents play a really important role in any learning situation. So I'd like to reiterate what Raquel, Sandy and David have written.

Under present circumstances in Portugal it's really difficult for primary English teachers to meet parents, which is a great pity, though this should not put any of us off! Raquel is a primary school teacher, (not just an English teacher!) so her lovely idea to have a kind of open day is great, and hopefully very possible! For many English teachers in primary, few of whom are classroom generalists, it would be a difficult thing to organise, though not impossible. Can I suggest that English teachers talk to their classroom teachers and suggest an evening for families to come to school and find out what's happening in English (in fact in everything the children are learning!).

Having cakes and drinks is a splendid idea, and I'm sure that those parents who did attend would enjoy this approach.

I get very frustrated... Recently I was invited to my daughter's school for a parents' evening. We were talked at by the head mistress, (lectured about bringing our children into school on time.)

Then all shuffled out into the corridors to get to our children's form rooms where we were to talk to the form teachers. Once we got there we all sat in rows and listened to the form teacher lecture us... My daughter has been at this school for five years, and we were talked at as though it was our first meeting. I've never met her other teachers... Every year it is the same. I go to all meetings because I live in hope that it may change!

My daughter is in the 9th year. But in primary it was exactly the same, though smaller and less dramatic – yes every year I go, I feel more dramatic about it :-)

I know that this happens all over the country, as yet parents still don't feel partners in their child's education... It's a cultural thing. Schools don't know how to go about it, but parents don't know how to deal with it either. That aside, the younger we start educating parents the better, and it's in primary where we can help them understand that they have a very important role to play in educating their children, in working with their children's teachers as allies.

Sorry, had to get that off my chest! Parents are our partners in educating the children we teach, it's important for any child, with or without physical disabilities.

Sandie Mourão

>Parents play a really important role in any learning situation. <

Indeed. It's very important to have parents on one's side when addressing special needs. One of two of our parents refuse to let their child be included on our special needs register because they feel it will upset the child or make them different from their friends. We try and reassure them, but sometimes we just have to agree to omit them from the register. The vast majority of parents are delighted that their children are getting extra help and we always run tests before and after to ensure that we do make a contribution to their progress. If parents are reluctant to come into school, you may still be able to reach them by asking them to complete a questionnaire about their child's special needs and how they are accommodated. Such questionnaires help us to plan better and to measure our success.

David Wilson

We have parents evening for subject teachers and evenings to meet the new form tutor at the start of each school year. Each pupil has a homework diary which also serves as a way to get messages from the school to the families. As our children come in on special buses they also have a person who travels on their transport who can liaise with parents.

Sandy Kinvig

>I was wondering what's the role of parents?<

Sandy's response to this point would be substantially the same as mine. My mainstream secondary school too issues every pupil with a diary in which messages can be sent home. There is a parents' evening for each year when parents can meet forum tutors, subject teachers and the school's special educational needs coordinator (SENCo), who is responsible for those with special needs within the school. The SENCo regularly contacts parents by phone and also takes calls from them. He will also arrange more formal reviews lasting about half an hour, attended by parents and a representative of the local authority, if additional support has been arranged. Parents will get copies of Individual Education Plans listing their child's targets two or three times a year and are invited to return a questionnaire asking them how well they feel their child is being supported at school. Parents can request interviews with the SENCo at any time. So there are many opportunities for parents and staff to meet, both formally and informally. Special needs teacher regard parents as key members of the team supporting vulnerable children.

David Wilson

One thought I want to leave with you is that methods and strategies which are special educational needs friendly may well benefit every child, whether disabled or not. And don't forget that the needs of vulnerable children require a teamwork response. We need to share ideas, support each other, collaborate with parents and advocate for children who cannot advocate for themselves.

David Wilson