

# ELT



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### IN THIS EDITION

#### **Phonetics or Phonics?**

by Marianne Jordan (Page 5)

#### **Adult Learners with Specific Learning Difficulties - A Case Study**

by Mara Temi (Page 8)

#### **Hot to help ELT students overcome test anxiety**

by Katy Quinn (Page 10)

#### **Controversial issues as triggers to empower HOTs in EFL settings**

by Yomaira Angelica Herreno Contreras & Jhonathan Alexander Huertas Torres (Page 13)

#### **CPD begins at home**

by Touria Jouilla McKee (Page 15)

#### **The Importance of Critical Reflection for English Language Practitioners**

by Mark Hennessy (page 19)

#### **Why use literature in the ELT classroom**

by Damian Cunniffe (Page 22)

### ELT Ireland features (Pages 2-3)

#### Welcome to our Fifth Bulletin

by Peter Lahiff

#### Keeping you up to Date by Ben Dobbs

#### ELTChinwag by Jane Seely

#### Letter from the Editor by Laura O'Grady

#### IATEFL Report by Cathryn Bennett

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# Adult Learners with Specific Learning Difficulties - A Case Study

by Mara Temi (Materials Designer, The English Studio)

As an experienced teacher, I know that there are always challenges and obstacles in the teaching and learning process. Some are easier to overcome than others, but what happens when these obstacles are rooted deep in the learning experience of an adult learner with different learning needs? How 'easy' it is to face obstacles and prevent frustration on these particular students? How

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can we educators 'spot' that our classrooms are not as homogeneous as we would like to believe? All these questions arose to surface and became an urgent matter to address early in 2018 when I realised some of my B2 students could not progress or even understand the contents being taught. To make matters worse, they were completely discouraged and frustrated with their learning experience of English. But this would not easily manifest or be communicated in advance, it rather was hinted at me through various signs and behaviour that indicated something needed more of my attention than I was giving it to.

In conversation with these students I learnt that they had all been diagnosed with a Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD), and that their learning was hindered by the traditional methods of the language classroom. Moreover, they all stated that they were deeply frustrated with the lack of interest of educators in individual learners. I therefore made it my mission to find out the likeliness of cases such as those of my students in other classes in my workplace. Surprisingly enough, I found out that there were one too many students diagnosed with some form or other of SpLD. Yet, none of them had thought of informing their teachers or the school about it, the main reason for the vast majority of them (85% of interviewees) being that they were ashamed of the effects this could potentially have in their everyday classroom experience.

In addition, all these clinically diagnosed SpLD students noticed their abilities were lower at particularly reading levels and at dense content processing information. This are indeed some of the main aspects that distinguish SpLD learners from others. Some other aspects that hinder their comprehension are word-level decoding in phonological awareness as well as difficulty with written expression and

numeracy skills (Kormos, 2017).

I believe the core of our teaching practice is to analyse it, discuss it, and update it to fit the needs of those that give the name to what we do: our learners. And these alarming numbers and testimonies prompted me to rethink my teaching to make it more inclusive and understanding of other learning needs. As such, I began exploring ways of actively aiding in these students' learning process.

## What to do? How to do it?

One of the key aspects in SpLDs instruction is a "programme that relies on the use of multiple senses (visual, auditive, movement) [that] can successfully enhance the L2 skills of students with SpLDs" (Kormos, 2017). This combined with learners' testimonies stating they need for more visual materials in the classroom (100% of interviewees) encouraged me to add more art into my teaching. Thus, I began classifying the levels of depth of my daily teaching into categories, in order to make them more manageable for my SpLD students.

As I realised aspects of grammar and vocabulary were other features of SpLD that affected my learners' proficiency, visualising and categorising material became a priority. 'Parcelled teaching instruction', as I like to call it, became a routine way of dealing with a small number of elements during class that could



Figure 1: Grammatical classification of quantifiers

By author

be transferred onto coloured paper and classified in columns on our classroom wall. This almost daily activity would either come from material students would read from our course book, a grammar reference book, the Internet, etc.; and the relevant parts of it would later on be selected by students before designing the cards for the wall.

As figure 1 illustrates, grammatical classification of quantifiers and its various degrees were all labelled with different colours to indicate the category they belong to (name of topic, quantifier name, degree). Whereas for vocabulary classification, colour coding would be divided in terms of word selected (prepositions for collocation in yellow – figure 2) and its various combinations with other words (adjectives in orange – figure 2).

This work would be combined with either memory games, drilling techniques for repetition and retention of items or any other kind of game that the classroom created as suggestions for classroom practice. As Kormos states in her 2017 paper on SpLD, the “emphasising daily review of

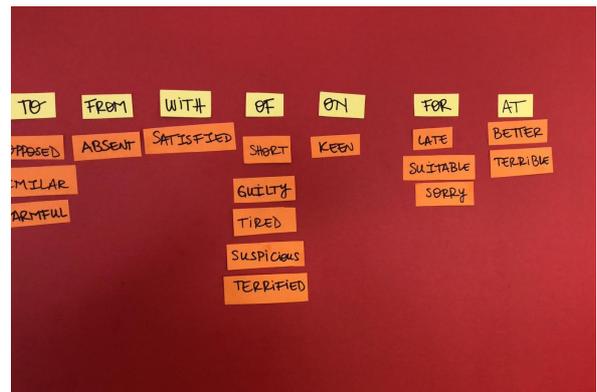


Figure 2:  
Collocation order with  
adjectives and  
prepositions

By author

**“As educators we need to consider what we “could offer in terms of materials, tasks, expectations, support, and classroom organisation””**

previous training” aids in adjusting the target language so these students can “also fulfil their potential” (Ibid). This collaborative work was motivating and it strengthen relationships within the group of learners to the point that the SpLD learners felt safe and comfortable enough to talk about their learning struggles, which resulted in a very cooperative body of work that allow every member of the class to take responsibility and become an active participant in their own, as well as in peers, learning process.

The work carried out visually extended to a physical response to certain classroom content, with syllable stress, intonation and consonant minimal pairs becoming an understanding and realisation of bodily functions and movements through TPR. And the learning and use of cooking verbs a task-based project carried out by our student chef and one of the SpLD learners.

The range of teaching techniques used and experimented with transformed my teaching into a more solid and effective practice, and the sense of commitment and communion towards learning and classroom experience that resulted from this work has been unbelievably valuable for all of those involved. Moreover, this first attempt at working with differentiated teaching proved successful in engaging SpLDs with their learning and help them develop their autonomy by becoming critical of the materials and techniques used through regular feedback on the work carried out.

As educators we need to consider what we “could offer in terms of materials, tasks, expectations, support, and classroom organisation” (Smith, 2018) that will aid us towards a more inclusive differentiated teaching practice, allowing us in the long run to help SpLD students to not only become successful language learners, but also to become more independent and critical of their learning process and being able to voice their difficulties and concerns regardless of their teacher or peers.

SpLD language learners need not a specialist, but a guide who is caring and interested into helping them become confident in their capabilities as learners, because after all everybody needs their own time. Even us teachers.

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