

# Special Needs and a second language

By Valerie Nicholls

I teach over 100 children every week, including in nursery schools. A typical lesson in a nursery school would follow the same routine: my class of three to four-year olds settle quietly in a semicircle, facing me. Already they are observing and concentrating on the small Word Bag and the large Magic Bag, strategically placed on my right and my left. There is a storybook turned face down under my chair. "What's in the Magic Bag?" say some of the children. "What are we singing about today?" "Do you have new cards?" say others.

They are all anticipating a different aspect of my lesson and they are all keen to get on, so we start with a greeting song and they join in. Not all, because Sean does not like to sing. He prefers to play word games: I put a card face down on the floor, I say the French word written on it and the children tell me what the picture underneath is. Sean is good at that; he is very quick! He is equally quick if we play the game the other way around: I show the picture and the children tell me the French word. To me, this is an exercise in hearing and speaking, for Sean, it's a chance to beat the others and he loves it. Sean is a visual learner. The flashcards are the focus of his attention. He needs to have a visual stimulus in order to learn. It is his dominant strength.

Jemma is different. She talks non-stop. She talks about everything; she goes from one idea to another and absorbs French at the same time. She sings her



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heart out and she likes to perform songs on her own. When we do colour hunts, she says the colours out loud to herself until she finds them. At colouring time, she sings to herself, or plays word games with other children "is this *vert* or is this *rouge*?" showing them the crayons. When I introduce a new word, the new sound makes her laugh and she enjoys repeating the words. She also enjoys a game whereby we say the words quietly and then very loud, then quietly again and then loud again. She tells other children how to say the words and she teaches mum at home!

Jemma is an auditory learner. She needs to hear and say words as the main input to her learning. Ben is different too. He is constantly fidgeting. He rocks his

chair back and forth and often falls off as a result. This makes him laugh and he does it again, most of the time because he knows it attracts attention and it makes the others laugh. Ben's needs are very simple: he wants to be actively involved.

Sitting down does not interest him. While Jemma is looking for colours, saying the words out loud, Ben is rushing around as though he was on a rugby pitch. When he has found his colour, he jumps up and down, often shouting the name of the colours he has found. When Ben sings a song on his own, it is accompanied by much movement and he enjoys miming stories. Ben cannot wait for the Magic Bag and to pass around the object that is inside. He is a physical learner. He needs to feel and handle material, and make use of his

space (and other people's!) in order to achieve efficient learning.

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Learning styles are beyond our control and these learning patterns will influence how we absorb knowledge. It is important that all teachers are aware of this when planning lessons, because teachers must reach the inner needs of all children. It therefore makes sense to have a range of activities that will enable all the children to benefit from the lessons.

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Some able children will be able to cope in any teaching situation, but the children whose learning patterns are very defined and repeatedly ignored will not do so well, even if they do not have special educational needs. They may get bored, become disruptive and lose interest. If they have learning difficulties, the problems will be similar. When someone says "I don't like French; it's too difficult", this probably has nothing to do with the language itself but a lot more to do with the teaching approach and whether the learning patterns have been met or not. When the learning patterns of children are met, enjoyment follows, bringing much success and satisfaction.

A child with special educational needs, such as dyslexia, will process information more slowly than other students. They will find great benefits in the constant repetition and the slow pace of language lessons and when words shown are associated with sound at the same time. Please remember that, special needs or not, a foreign language class may not produce results overnight. I have witnessed children being silent in my classes for weeks, sometimes a whole term. Then one day, they come closer, they join in, they sing out loud for the first time stringing the words together correctly. It may have taken weeks for them to feel ready, but witnessing this metamorphosis is very rewarding. Is that not what matters?

The variety of sounds and the range of intonations that languages provide are beneficial to children with hearing difficulties or speech impairments. When a child hears a sound time after time, the neurons from his ear stimulate connections in his auditory cortex. Sound stimulation does not only come from the words themselves, but also from games such as sound lotto games, whistles at the start of treasure hunts, and various intonations when saying words (for instance saying the words loud then saying them quietly).

Flashcards will help children with hearing difficulties focus on the words, their sounds and their meaning, which they may not have an opportunity to do in any other subject at school. The intonations and accents of a foreign language provide them with a wider range of sounds which they will have many opportunities to repeat. The music of the words is very attractive to a child.

Idiomatic sounds make my pupils laugh and even if some cannot say the French *r* or the French *an* sounds straight away, they have fun trying! It is crucial that children hear the spoken word and learn to discriminate sounds.

Children with learning difficulties need to gain understanding of the meaning of words and the meaning of movement. This is done through songs and stories, rhymes and commands in the foreign language, as well as through everyday communication in the child's own language. Movement can be an interpretation of emotions, or everyday situations, and frees the imagination. Miming a story is a very worthwhile exercise and will encourage children to develop understanding of a range of situations. I always have a story in my French lessons and the children look forward to being the characters. Using their bodies to communicate is sometimes easier than using words. Language classes use miming in all sorts of activities. Movement will enhance motor skills which may be lacking.

## Multi-sensory teaching

*[The child] should be methodically exposed to stimuli that will develop his senses rationally and thus lay the foundation for his mental powers.*

**Maria Montessori** *The Discovery of the Child*

I could not discuss an education matter without talking about the multi-sensory method. Maria Montessori has influenced my own approach to teaching French to young children and it has proven very successful over the years. Stimulating the senses opens the door into the brain and its intricate connections.

A child with poor sensory awareness will benefit from the sensory input of the foreign language class. Games with feely bags and boxes, soft toys, puppets, colourful flashcards and foam dice will not fail with children who need sensory stimulation. It is very easy to include activities stimulating the senses of touch, sight and hearing in a fun language class. Taste and smell are a little more difficult to introduce but it is possible. I use perfume with six year olds when I teach likes and dislikes, but there are more possibilities such as introducing fruit smells for the shopping game.

The short activities and a variety of games and songs will be most appropriate for a child with poor concentration span. A child with learning difficulties may find it hard to concentrate for longer than a few seconds at a time. Not all of the children in one group will concentrate and lose interest at the same time, so it is vitally important to have lots of short captivating activities involving as many interesting features as possible (sounds, pictures etc) so as to reach all of them at some point in the lesson. A foreign language lesson will have plenty of opportunities for such games and songs.

## A set routine

Children with special educational needs can follow the simple structure of a lesson, because there is a set routine. In my toddlers' classes, we start with a song then say "bonjour" to all the children one by one. Two or three more songs follow as a warm up before the games. Half way through the lesson our new words are introduced. The children know when they should close their eyes. They also know when it is time for the Magic Bag and they often start the Magic Counting without me! A routine provides children with boundaries and perhaps this creates a certain logic that they find comforting and reassuring.

## Self esteem

The self-esteem children derive from their success, the motivation and the confidence they show cannot be underestimated. Once confidence settles, the rest falls into place. For children with learning difficulties, the language class is definitely one of the best ways in which success – however it manifests itself – is attainable. Furthermore, when a child knows that a weekly language lesson will make him or her feel better, this growing confidence will not be left behind as soon as the lessons are over.

The children's own social skills will also be enhanced by the success they experience in language classes. Failure does not help making friends in the playground. Successful learning contributes to a little more popularity. This cannot be underestimated either.

## Success stories

I have heard many success stories. In my own classes, a six year old boy with mild dyspraxia and speech difficulties

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remained quiet for a while, sitting close to his mum (in my classes, parents and children learn together). One day, I introduced *comment ça va?* From that day, he came into the classroom saying *comment ça va?* to everyone and started to take part a lot more. He still had problems with a few sounds, but he took great pleasure in speaking, not letting his difficulties get in the way. He enjoyed handling the props very much and looked forward to his turn with the feely bag. He also enjoyed being the centre of attention during our fashion show!

Once a four-year-old boy with severe speech difficulties came into my toddlers' class with his mum for the first time. I was teaching the word *jaune* (yellow) and another colour. He liked the sound that *jaune* made and he kept repeating the word. He liked the songs and whenever the word *jaune* appeared, he repeated it.

A colleague of mine taught a young girl with Down's syndrome. She attended her class for a few weeks during which time she focused her mind on the colour *rose* (pink). Somehow, the sound made an impact and created an emotion, because it made her laugh. This may seem very little, and perhaps insignificant to many people, but a teacher will know the importance of small steps. ▀

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