

Creating English Courses for Learners with Diverse Disabilities: A Personal Journey

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Introduction

As a mother of a wonderful daughter with cerebral palsy, I have had the privilege of connecting with numerous parents whose children face various disabilities. During the early years of our children's lives, our paths crossed in polyclinics, rehabilitation centers, and summer camps organized in Zhytomyr City, Ukraine, by local or international charity foundations.

In July 2017, a group of about 20 parents, including me, were painting ornaments on wooden beads as a recreational camp activity in a picturesque locality near the Teteriv River. As it always happens at such meetings, we turned to the topic of prospects for the future. Somebody suggested the idea of teaching our children English to raise their chances of online employment when they grow up. The suggestion was immediately approved by several moms who started the discussion of how to organize it. Half-jokingly I was 'appointed' as the 'knowledgeable person capable of tackling it.' Back then, I was a postgraduate student who had just selected a dissertation topic connected to preparing English-as-a-foreign language teachers to support students with special education needs in a mainstream school setting. I was not really competent to deal with such a task, which I mentioned to the other moms, but then even more parents were interested in the idea. Their main argument was that I could make it a part of my research work and would learn in the process. This was how I accepted the challenge to create a course in English for beginners with diverse abilities.

After toying with the idea for several months, I realized that I needed a support team, a place for work, books, and a clear understanding of the needs of the students with diverse needs. For clarification to the readers, students with diverse needs are a range of above or below average needs of children resulting from their socio-economical, physical, emotional, intellectual, and/or social characteristics and contributing to additional needs/special needs of learners that, if not effectively addressed in most cases, pose barriers to learning (Haihambo & Shiimi, 2019). Coming back to my story, I started with a post on Facebook, which helped me to find two certified English teachers willing to work for free with children with disabilities—an old acquaintance of mine and a former student. Our team, comprised of these two colleagues and me was enough to start. And, later several parents agreed to assist their children.

Starting the Initiative

We chose to ask for a classroom in the Sunday school of St. Michael's Cathedral of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. Unexpectedly, we were also provided a free setting in a private educational center. I asked our parents to choose, and they chose the first option due to the

special spirit of the place, the tolerance of the school's administration and teachers, the central location, and the closeness of public traffic stops, which is crucial for children using wheelchairs. We were granted permission to have classes in the Sunday school and provided with a classroom on the first floor.

Finally, we were ready to meet our learners. At that time, we did not know how many of them we would have to teach. So, we prepared 30 copies of a language test and two questionnaires (decorated with stickers)—to find out their English level and to understand their physical, intellectual, and sensory possibilities and learning preferences. We decided to start with a 12-16 age group due to the target audience we seemed to have. We phoned all the parents who seemed interested, encouraging them to pass the information on, and left all the materials at the reception of the charity foundation center that had organized the summer camp. It was convenient as most of the children were getting rehab sessions there.

Twelve students volunteered to participate in the course. Many of them studied in schools for children with intellectual, physical, or sensory disabilities. Some of them had never taken English classes before, and others had attended a local private inclusive school or studied at home. Through the testing, six students showed a 0-A1 level of English (also called the Beginner, Breakthrough or Introductory level in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)), four had an A2 (the Elementary or Waystage level in the CEFR), and two were more proficient, with a B1 level (the Intermediate or Threshold in the CEFR). Accordingly, we decided to create three groups, but then one of the most proficient students refused to participate in the course as it was next to impossible for him to commute to the school from the city suburbs with a wheelchair, and we had no funding to provide him with transportation services. The other A2-B1 student decided to join the A1-A2 group.

In the first group, there were five students ages 12-13 and one who was 16 with special educational needs connected to mild and moderate intellectual disabilities, a severe degree of hearing loss, and a speech sound disorder. Having no practical experience in teaching learners with these disabilities, we decided to:

- find an English book that would be feasible for them,
- enrich the educational process with language games,
- provide a multitude of visual aids, and
- make the pace slower.

For the student with hearing loss, I purchased a loudspeaker, and one of the teachers worked with him as a teacher aide. However, we could not come up with ideas of how to adjust our teaching methods and materials to meet the needs of the student with a severe speech sound disorder.

In the second group, we had to consider the special educational needs caused by cerebral palsy, vision loss, and speech sound disorders. We checked if there were ramps in the building, if the width of the doors and the height of the tables were sufficient to let a wheelchair pass, and if the toilet was accessible. We also selected communicative activities that did not require moving around the class, printed the course materials using a large font size (22) visible to the student with vision loss, and made sure the classroom was adequately lit. We also offered him a smartphone camera and a magnifying glass. In addition, we adjusted the pace of teaching for our learners' needs.

With these considerations in mind, we were ready to choose English book sets for each group. We consulted with 11 experienced school teachers and asked them the following questions:

1. (0-A1 level). *Which English textbook is feasible for all (or most) students? Which of them gives a sufficient number of understandable activities and repetitions? Which includes more creative hands-on assignments?*
2. (A2 level). *Which textbook suggests materials in multiple formats, such as visual and audio? Which provides intensive development of oral communicative skills (considering potential difficulties with writing and reading)? Which textbook is accessible and comprehensible for students?*

First Group

For the 0-A1 level students, more than half of the teachers suggested Fly High 1 (Kozanoglo, 2010), so we selected it. Later, the parents asked us to add a notebook for teaching spelling, which we did. For the A2 level students, the teachers provided various suggestions. We had to choose between many book sets and agreed on Enterprise 1 (Evans & Dooley, 2000) and Blockbuster 1 (Dooley & Evans, 2015). However, Enterprise 1 ended up being too complex for our students, so we switched to Blockbuster 1 after some sessions. After the preparatory stage of our project, we were ready to set a timetable and start. We decided to have classes three times a week at 6 p.m. and 7 p.m. correspondingly.

During the initial lessons, we discovered that the two assistants in the first group struggled to handle all the challenges, such as inattentiveness, hyperactivity, and a lack of self-organization skills. To address these issues, we reached out to parents, asking them to become student assistants for their children, and some agreed. Since it was an A1 level course, their language proficiency was not crucial, and their involvement significantly improved performance and organization. Parents played a key role in signaling to me if repetition or clarification was needed. They also helped control the quality of the written works.

However, we encountered two other challenges simultaneously. Some parents completed parts of the homework and classwork on behalf of their children to present a favorable image to others, while some parents protested certain assignments. For instance, the mother of a student with paresis (a reduction in muscle strength with a limited range of voluntary movement (Oczkowski & Bodzioch, 2021)) of his right hand consistently objected whenever I asked him to go to the blackboard to write, despite his ability to hold a piece of chalk in his right hand. Every time I did it his mother would say that it was her son's weak point. In response to this, I continued inviting him to the blackboard and praised him for every effort in spite of hardly intelligible handwriting and mistakes. To make it a fun activity I would praise him for small things, give him a high five before he went to his seat and call him (and all the other students) a winner or a purebred lion. The grandmother of another student insisted on completing extra assignments during the lesson. Therefore, to ensure everyone was on the same page, we designed creative, fun activities for early finishers (like 'Colour and write', 'Match a picture and a sentence', 'Draw a character and describe it' etc.).

Several additional challenges surfaced later in our course. I discovered that every activity needed careful guidance. For instance, pair reading was less effective than expected, as many students lacked communicative experience. They also struggled with turn-taking and did not comprehend when to start after another student stopped reading. I had to assign a reader each time, and a parent had to demonstrate what was required to be read. Once the students understood the instructions, they willingly engaged in reading, answering questions, writing exercises, playing simple guessing games, and participating in activities involving physical movements and arts. However, we had to eliminate many activities requiring synthesis, analysis, and comparison. Instead, we relied mostly on memorization. For example, most students could not identify and correct mistakes in words, create a sentence from words, compare word lengths, analyze structures, or determine if two words contained the same or different sounds.

When repeating sentences, students tended to skip a word or two from every sentence. To address this, I found it helpful to bend my fingers (one at a time) after pronouncing every word, and unbending them when the student repeated the sentence. Every missed word resulted in fingers left unbent, helping with self-awareness. This teaching strategy was especially effective for a student with immediate echolalia (repeating other people's words and sentences (Field, 2023)) who would repeat most of the sentences I said usually skipping the first word or two.

Another challenge was associated with meeting the special educational needs caused by hearing loss. Positioning a loudspeaker in front of the student to assist him in repeating words, or

speaking louder to him, proved ineffective as he would still mispronounce the words. Therefore, a student assistant found it effective to also write down all key words in the student's notebook, resulting in improved pronunciation. In hindsight, a field system (a microphone and a set of headphones) would likely have been helpful as well. Regarding the student with a severe speech sound disorder, she declined to participate in oral communication but excelled in both accuracy and speed in other activities, such as drill vocabulary and grammar exercises, colouring and drawing, which we actively praised her for.

Second Group

As for the second group, comprised of 14-to-16- year-olds, all of whom learned English at school and were at the same A2 level of proficiency, the immediate challenges we faced included:

1. A student with a severe degree of vision loss could perceive English letters in the copies that we printed for him. However, since he primarily knew how to read Braille, printed English language materials were not helpful. Someone had to assist him with reading, explanations, and summarizing video content. Initially, I took on this role for several classes, but balancing teaching and assisting became challenging. As a result, we requested his mother's help, and fortunately, her English proficiency allowed the student to participate actively. However, her tendency to criticize him for mistakes became discouraging, leading us to discuss and find common ground.
2. A student with a speech sound disorder was reserved and slow in both writing and speaking. To accommodate her pace, we paired her with a student assistant and allowed her to write fewer sentences in each exercise to keep up with the class. Each time she wanted to speak, we called on her. Unfortunately, her grandmother, who did not know English, could not assist with her homework at home. Although we attempted telephone consultations, she left the course after falling ill during the winter.
3. Another student who used crutches was the most diligent in the group and exhibited significant progress. However, she also left the group in winter due to transportation challenges caused by heavy snowfalls. Her parents were concerned about exposing her to cold weather and viruses.
4. The next student displayed features characteristic of Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). He frequently left his seat, engaged with classmates instead of completing assignments, did not want to write, and arrived late to class. Recognizing the potential reasons for these behaviors, we decided to change classroom activities more frequently, provide him with more talking time, praise him for attentiveness, and offer his mother the opportunity to participate in the classes.

Looking back, an online format might have been beneficial for some of these students. Students in both groups successfully completed the first level, which lasted for an academic year, and commenced the second one. A success story we have from this initiative is that, a student, who initially appeared uninvolved, astonished everyone by speaking English fluently within the first days after relocating to Norway with his family.

Lessons Learned

In addition to clear insights, like understanding that teaching diverse students in a single classroom necessitates accommodations, we discovered three important lessons that I share below. My hope is that teachers supporting English learners with diverse needs will use these lessons learned as a starting point and build from there, for the benefit of their students:

1. Building rapport is essential. In our initiative, we (teachers) hugged every student before and after each class, praised them for every small achievement, offered compliments, and sought feasible ways to highlight their strengths. This approach boosted their confidence as English learners and enabled us to complete the first level on schedule.
2. Universal design is non-negotiable. Throughout our practice, we actively applied universal design principles when supporting learners' linguistic, physical, and intellectual diversities. We incorporated universal design principles in their practice, which involves extending these practices into school premises, textbooks, methods, choices, and services.
3. Multimodal learning formats are crucial. Offering students both online and offline access, as well as utilizing visual, auditory, and tactile formats for all materials greatly enhanced accessibility throughout the course, which also supported student engagement with the content and motivation.

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