

The ABC of EFL ... 'SEN'

In this issue Anne Margaret Smith looks at 'Special Educational Needs'.

The phrase 'Special Educational Needs' (SEN) was first used in the Warnock report in 1978, where it replaced the terms 'ineducable' and 'educationally subnormal' in UK education policy. However, it remains for many an unsatisfactory expression, perpetuating the idea that any failures in the learning process necessarily originate in the learner, rather than in mismatches between materials, teachers, learners, curricula, and environments. In some cases 'special' has come to be used as a euphemistic label for 'problematic'. (See Corbett (1996) for a full discussion of this.) This, though, is the term used in the British state education system, and to avoid further confusion and division between private and state sectors, I continue to use the expressions 'Special Needs' and 'learning difficulties', whilst keeping these reservations in mind.

Although 'SEN' is an issue that has a high profile in the UK state system, it is not often high on the agenda in the (largely private) world of TEFL; below I discuss why this might be so. First, though, it would be useful to start by identifying what 'special needs' are, as opposed to 'ordinary' difficulties that we can all experience when learning something new.

'Special needs' are defined as those for which learners will require additional support, if they are to be enabled to succeed. These include visual impairment, hearing loss, and mobility limitations, which are usually relatively easy to detect. Harder to identify are difficulties in learning due to emotional or cognitive problems; here we meet more acronyms that need to be unpacked. Some difficulties stem from what are often described as Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD), or Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD). Others are Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD), such as Dyslexia; developmental disorders on the autism spectrum (such as Asperger's syndrome) also fall into this category. Unfortunately, these problems often have many of the same symptoms as common language learning problems, making them very hard to diagnose, even for experienced educational psychologists. In a sense, though, this does not matter too much in practical terms, since the 'label' is rarely as important as the teacher's response to the difficulties the learner is experiencing.

As to why 'SEN' does not seem to have a high profile in the British TEFL sector, there are at least three possible explanations for this:

1. students with 'SEN' rarely travel to the UK to take language courses.

It is probably true that fewer students with acknowledged difficulties enrol in British language

schools, but a recent survey of ELT professionals suggests that it is by no means unheard of, and this theory doesn't account for the students learning English in their own countries.

2. EFL professionals don't discuss 'SEN' because to do so would be to invite more work for themselves; they ignore the issue in order to avoid taking responsibility for their students' support needs.

This cynical view does not tally with the picture, painted by the survey responses of teachers struggling to accommodate their learners' needs, often with little support.

3. TEFL has such a strongly learner-centred ethos that teachers already consider the full range of their learners' individual needs (both ordinary and special), thus rendering redundant any extra terminology.

I would like to think this is the most likely explanation. However, this laudable willingness to accommodate students, unless backed up with information and practical support, will only succeed so far.

Government figures suggest that about one in five of the UK school population have some additional support needs at some stage. Unless Britain is for some reason unusual in this respect, it seems likely that most of us at some point in our careers will encounter learners who need extra help to overcome the difficulties that they have with their studies. Since in most cases ELT teachers in the private sector have no support department to fall back on, we do need to be better informed, and to get practical assistance from colleagues.

The good news is that implementing basic good practice in the classroom will help most students a lot. Our learners are not without talent, too, and many will have developed strategies to mitigate their problems. We should have faith in ourselves, and them, and approach these situations as teaching challenges rather than as learning difficulties.

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References

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