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

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As a mother to a wonderful daughter with cerebral palsy, I have connected with many parents facing similar challenges in clinics, rehab centers, and camps. In 2017, during a camp activity, the idea of teaching our kids English for a better future came up. Though I, a postgraduate student, initially felt unsure, parents were interested. They suggested I could make it part of my research work and learn along the way. So, I embraced the challenge to create an English course for beginners with diverse abilities.

Starting the Initiative

After thinking about it for a few months, I realized I needed a support team, a place to work, resources, and a clear understanding of the needs of students with diverse abilities. On Facebook I found two certified English teachers willing to assist for free. The team, consisting of these two teachers and me, was enough to get started. Later, several parents also agreed to assist their children, making our initiative a collaborative effort.

We asked for a classroom at a local church in Ukraine and got a surprise offer from an educational center for our English course. We let the parents decide, and they chose the local church because of its special atmosphere, the school's staff, the central location, and the proximity to public transport, which was crucial for children in wheelchairs. With a classroom on the first floor, we were set to meet our learners. Not knowing how many to expect, we prepared tests and questionnaires for kids aged 12-16. Twelve students joined, with diverse abilities, creating two groups based on their English levels. In the first group, we had students with intellectual disabilities, hearing loss, and speech disorders. We chose an

English book suitable for them, included language games, visual aids, and adjusted the pace as needed.

The second group included students with cerebral palsy, vision loss, and speech disorders. We ensured the classroom was accessible and adjusted the teaching pace for them as well. Once again I asked the teachers on our team to choose suitable English textbooks, considering the various learning needs, preferences, and English levels.

First Group

For students at the beginner level (0-A1), the teachers recommended using *Fly High 1* for learning English. Later, we added a spelling notebook for extra practice. For students at the A2 level, teachers suggested *Enterprise 1* and *Blockbuster 1*, but we switched to *Blockbuster 1* because it suited our students better. We decided to hold classes three times a week at 6 p.m. and 7 p.m.

In the first group, we faced challenges like inattentiveness. To help, we asked parents to assist their children during class, to improve outcomes but extra challenges emerged. Some parents completed their children's work, while others disagreed with certain assignments. For example, one mother objected when her son was asked to write on the blackboard due to his weak hand. We continued to encourage him.

Later, we found that students struggled with some activities like oral dialogue communication and identifying mistakes in words. To help them, we simplified tasks. When students skipped words while answering questions, we used a finger-bending technique to improve their awareness. For a student with immediate echolalia, who could only repeat sentences with slight skips, this method was especially effective.

Supporting students with hearing loss was difficult. However, writing down key words improved pronunciation for one student. Looking back, a microphone and headphone system might have been helpful. Another student with a severe speech disorder did not participate in oral communication, but

excelled in vocabulary and grammar exercises, coloring, and drawing, which we celebrated.

Second Group

In the second group, all 14-to-16-year-olds were at the same A2 level in English. One student had severe vision loss; he could only read materials in Braille which we could not provide. So, we had his mother help him understand printed texts. Another student spoke loudly commenting on other students' appearances, refusing to do assignments, and standing up when he was supposed to read or write. To solve these problems, we changed modes of interaction or switched activities every 7-12 minutes. It was also helpful to call the student out to the blackboard and encourage him for correct answers.

Lessons Learned

In this teaching experience, we learned three key lessons that I'll share here.

1. Building rapport is vital (Booker, 2024). We praised their achievements and highlighted their strengths, boosting their confidence, which helped them meet the goals on time.
2. Universal Design for Learning is essential (CAST, 2024). We applied universal design principles to support linguistic, physical, and intellectual diversity, extending these practices to curriculum design, school resources and methods.
3. Multimodal learning is crucial (Gunther & Van Leeuwen, 2001). By offering online and offline materials and using visual, auditory, and tactile formats, we enhanced accessibility and student engagement.

References

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