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Small Changes, Big Impact: How We Adapted Our EFL Lessons for Visually Impaired and Sighted Students

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Introduction

What is it that makes a teacher successful? There are many different kinds of great teachers, but the most successful teachers are the ones who never stop learning. The richest learning resource we have as teachers is our students. It is through our students that we can learn to make our teaching more effective, cultivate a more positive learning environment, and adapt our lessons to be inclusive and accessible for all learners. In large classrooms, this might look like differentiation and scaffolding lessons for individual students. Oftentimes, classes might also have students from very different backgrounds and ability levels. In our case, as university English teachers in Thailand, our success as teachers has been tested by our ability to learn to adapt our lessons to effectively teach classes with both visually impaired and sighted students studying together. Since we had not had specific training on this, there was a steep learning curve to develop lesson plans that would enhance the learning of all students. This new challenge called for us to transform our teaching methods to meet students' needs, underscoring our core belief that education is a journey of lifelong learning for both students and teachers.

The students we work with are primarily first-year undergraduates taking general communicative English courses, and while the majority of our students are sighted, we also have a number of blind and visually impaired students enrolling in our university each

year. We have both had individual experiences teaching blind and visually impaired students in our classrooms, typically with one or two visually impaired students enrolled in a class of 30-40 students each semester. While visually impaired learners' potential to acquire a second language is the same as that of their peers, they are likely to experience unique challenges in their language learning process, especially when teachers rely heavily on visual teaching methods or those designed for sighted students. For example, one common activity for teaching new vocabulary is matching pictures and words, but presenting new vocabulary through imagery can be difficult or even useless for visually impaired learners (Belova, 2017). Moreover, traditional methods of teaching reading often include teaching students to skim and scan text for information; however, this can prove ineffective, time-consuming, and even exhausting for visually impaired learners who rely on screen readers or Braille to read line-by-line (Attachoo & Sitthitikul, 2020; Tran & Pho, 2020).

Another key consideration is ensuring students feel socially integrated into the classroom community. In our teaching, we have seen how our visually impaired students may be socially isolated in class. Therefore, it is important as teachers to create a collaborative classroom culture where students regularly engage in accessible team-based activities. These activities help foster strong relationships and understanding, which not only benefits visually impaired students but are also important for all of our learners as first-year students transitioning to a new university community.

Through our experiences, we have grown in our belief that designing effective lessons and cultivating an inclusive classroom environment is our responsibility as teachers, no matter the number of visually impaired learners in our classrooms. In fact, changing our lessons to be more aligned with the concepts of Universal Design for

Learning (UDL) has made our teaching methods more effective for all students. UDL is a framework that promotes learner agency by recognizing the diversity among learners. It encourages the design of learning experiences that allow for multiple means of (1) engagement, (2) representation, and (3) action and expression (CAST, 2024). In this way, UDL puts inclusivity at the forefront of our classroom, allowing learners of all abilities to engage with learning materials in a way that is both meaningful and impactful.

Working with visually impaired learners alongside sighted students in the same classroom has helped us evolve and grow as teachers and has allowed us to take a more flexible and universal approach to language learning. As teachers without prior experience or training working with visually impaired learners, we felt concerned initially about our ability to provide a comfortable and effective learning environment for our students. For example, we normally use visual aids to enhance students' learning, which present limitations for visually impaired students. However, this does not mean we should completely stop using visual aids in class, but we need to adjust the way we use them. Instead of just showing some pictures on the screen, for example, we describe what is in the pictures and ask some questions. Over time, we have learned that many of the aspects of UDL can be integrated quite seamlessly into our classes. This has allowed us to become more adaptable teachers, providing diverse options for learning, which benefits all of our students.

Practical Applications for the Classroom

Materials Preparation & Lesson Planning

In preparation for teaching, we have made several adjustments to accommodate all learning styles, which we have found to be successful. In terms of our course materials and slides, previously only available in PDF format, we have now created Word

documents with all of the course information organized by lesson. This facilitates the creation of Braille materials and allows visually impaired students to use screen readers to dictate content to them through headphones. In addition, the lesson documents include written descriptions of any images used in the class. Students can read about the images individually or work together with a partner for paired practice in speaking, listening, and vocabulary activities.

Furthermore, adjustments to activities and written assessments may be necessary. This can easily be done if we maintain a flexible mindset with instructions, timing, and output. For example, we have offered digital or verbal options for assessments that have typically used a written format. We have also extended the time for assessments and activities to accommodate students' use of Braille or assistive technology, which may take more time than visual reading.

Ultimately, while being open-minded and making these preparations each semester has proven effective, the most critical tool we have is the rapport we have built with our students, being open to what they can teach us. The most valuable information we have gained has come from openly talking with our visually impaired learners and their peers more frequently in order to ask them questions about class, preferences, and their lives. These daily or weekly check-ins may take extra time before or after class, but they are crucial for all of our learners' comfort and success. Having strong and open communication with students helps with effective lesson planning and creating a positive classroom environment for all.

Teaching Pronunciation

Our class meetings begin each day with a brief pronunciation warm-up to improve students' confidence in speaking. Each of these mini-lessons focuses on one or two sounds, and we use a variety of techniques to engage the students in practicing these sounds. This is one type of activity that we have adjusted because it previously relied heavily on visual methods of teaching.

For instance, one of these lessons focuses on the "sh" and "ch" sounds, which are often mispronounced by Thai learners of English. We begin by introducing the sounds by demonstrating them for the class. To make this accessible for all students, we allow students to observe our mouth shape while also explaining verbally the shape of the mouth, tongue, and airflow needed to make the sounds. For guided practice, we then play a guessing game with minimal pairs. We show students two images (e.g., ships/chips; shin/chin; wash/watch) and ask them to say the name of each image with correct pronunciation. For students who cannot see the image, we provide verbal descriptions of the images. For example, we have moved away from only asking students "What is this?" while pointing at an image and instead have included a description such as "What do you call two very large boats?". While we still use images in this activity, in some rounds we require all students to only rely on listening to the verbal description without any visual support to guess the pairs. These verbal cues improve all students' listening skills and make our lessons more accessible.

Finally, we typically wrap up our pronunciation point with some tongue twisters, which even our university students find entertaining. Because tongue twisters are a valuable tool for pronunciation practice, it is helpful for all students to hear the teacher say these tongue twisters first and be provided with accessible written formats. Instead of

pointing at each tongue twister and asking students to say it, we make sure to clearly say it aloud for the class to listen to and repeat. Students of all learning styles and abilities can also work in pairs to listen and repeat after each other.

Shadowing Technique for Dialogues

Because our courses are focused on building students' English communication skills, students are encouraged to apply new pronunciation points, vocabulary, and grammar in different contexts using short dialogues. When students practice speaking through example dialogues, they often depend heavily on reading from the script. In an inclusive class with visually impaired students, relying on reading can create challenges. One effective approach is to use the shadowing technique in which students listen to either the teacher or an audio recording and immediately repeat what they hear (Kadota, 2019). By shifting the focus from reading to listening, shadowing allows all students to participate more equally in dialogue practice.

During the dialogue practice, the teacher first models the conversation aloud with clear intonation and expression. Students then listen carefully and repeat immediately after the teacher, trying to copy the rhythm, stress, and emotion. This way, all students are engaged through careful listening and imitation of the sounds. Moreover, the teacher can repeat the whole process several times to ensure that students are familiar with the dialogue. The repetition helps them remember longer chunks of language and speak more smoothly. After that, students practice the same dialogue with their partners. During this activity, students can help each other keep up with the dialogue as well as focus on practicing their intonation and expressions. Furthermore, visually impaired students can use the screen reader on their laptops if they need further assistance in reading each line for them while also interacting with their partners. Using the shadowing technique for

dialogue practice not only helps strengthen pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension, but it also encourages confidence and a sense of participation among all students.

Communicating in Context: Shopping Role Play

One of the lessons in our English course is ‘Shopping’. We originally planned a shopping activity that involves students moving around the classroom to shop for the items from a provided list. Our concern for visually impaired students at the time was whether they would feel uncomfortable moving around or not. Therefore, we explained to them what the activity would be like and asked them whether they would prefer to remain seated or to move around the room with the help of a friend. Surprisingly, we found that many visually impaired students are eager to move around the room to play this game. Meanwhile, those who feel more comfortable sitting can still participate in the role-playing as a seller. Receiving these responses has made us realize that we should not assume what students can or cannot do. Effective communication with students is key to supporting their learning.

Before we start the shopping game, we teach common language expressions used for buying and selling things and review related vocabulary that students will hear and use in the activity. Students also practice buying and selling dialogues to get familiar with the context. After that, we divide the students into groups. Each group is assigned a specific shop, such as a pharmacy, supermarket, bakery, etc., along with picture cards showing the items they must sell. Each group also gets a shopping list of things to buy, and each member takes a turn to shop for an item from the other groups. This means that only one member goes shopping at a time, and the rest stay at their assigned shop and take turns selling their items. When they buy each item, students get a picture card of the item and

return it to their group. After that, the next group member goes shopping for the next item on their group's list. The first group to buy all the items on their shopping list wins.

In doing this activity, visually impaired students can be paired with another sighted student and go shopping together, taking turns using English to buy the items. During the activity, we observed how students worked together and supported one another. We always receive feedback from students, including visually impaired students, saying that they have fun doing this activity, and that it makes them feel more confident using the target language while connecting with other students.

Conclusion

At the heart of successful teaching is the willingness to learn and grow throughout our careers in response to our students' needs and changing contexts. Teaching both visually impaired and sighted students in an inclusive classroom has made us more considerate and flexible when planning our lessons and preparing materials for all students. This involves integrating some of the concepts of UDL by presenting material in multiple ways and adapting class activities and assessments where various outputs are acceptable. In addition, strong communication and supportive relationships among students and teachers are essential in order to create a positive classroom environment where students feel more involved, supported, and comfortable seeking help when needed. Ultimately, inclusivity does not necessarily mean a complete overhaul of our teaching in order to cater to a few specific students, but rather a mindful shift toward enhancing the learning experience of all individuals in our classroom and promoting equity in learning.

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