

Using information and communications technology to include additional language learners with special educational needs: access or control?

It is the last lesson of the week. Having just arrived from Physical Education, a couple of girls and a dozen boys are now gathering noisily outside the French room, blocking the corridor. "High as kites" intones a sympathetic colleague of the French teacher, who is wearily coaxing 9R6 into a line. After the French room door is unlocked, the class bursts in, eyeing the computers on the benches along the walls. Some of the boys pull chairs up to the machines, impatient to log on. "Are we on the computers?" asks one of the girls sitting in the rows of desks in the middle of the room.

Many of us who teach modern foreign languages (MFL) to children with special educational needs (SEN) would plead guilty to the charge of using information and communications technology (ICT) once in a while to give ourselves a break and to keep our classes quiet. Yet we would also argue that this worst-case scenario not only misrepresents current practice, but also perpetuates a myth that computer-based MFL lessons with SEN students are just exercises in containment. So what, other than a welcome distraction, does ICT offer MFL teachers and their learners with SEN?

First, ICT usage can reveal which strengths and weaknesses each learner with SEN brings to the process of learning MFL. Screening software such as LASS Secondary (<http://www.lucid-research.com>) not only challenges and entertains students through games, but also builds standardised graphical profiles of their cognitive and literacy skills, thus contributing to the identification of underlying memory and phonological difficulties. Teachers watching SEN learners as they interact with MFL multimedia programs will observe such students deploying, say, their powers of visual memory to compensate for auditory weaknesses, although the activity was originally designed to develop listening comprehension. Foreknowledge of learning deficits, or differences, means that MFL teachers can modify their lesson plans and set on- and off-computer tasks that enable their charges to experience success.

Secondly, SEN students boost their self-esteem and employability when they engage with word-processing, presentation and other office applications in MFL lessons. But what is best for MFL learners with SEN: business versions, e.g. Microsoft Word and PowerPoint; or educational versions, e.g. Clicker (<http://www.cricksoft.com>) and Writing with Symbols (<http://www.widgit.com>); or multilingual versions, e.g. Accent (<http://www.accentsoft.com>) and Nisus Writer (<http://www.nisus-soft.com>)? The version with which they are already familiar is likely to be the best choice when they begin MFL. Productivity software nowadays can display and process text correctly in a variety of European languages. Of greater significance is how appropriately the package meets a particular learner's needs through such features as spellcheckers, voice recognition, synthesised speech, word banks, on-screen grids and graphics handling. Most important of all is what the learner is expected to do with the software. Although autonomy remains the ultimate goal, many students with SEN work best when their teacher sets tightly structured writing tasks necessitating a minimum of keyboarding. A looser agenda may raise the prospect of individuals staring mutely or disaffectedly at their monitors in incomprehension or with writer's block.

Thirdly, via MFL tutorial software, SEN learners may progress at their own level and pace, make mistakes in privacy, play entertaining and challenging games and interact

with a multisensory world appealing to their learning styles, whether visual, auditory or kinaesthetic. Such is the capacity of modern digital storage devices that they can deliver complete multimedia courses featuring text, sound, graphics, animations and video. Some, e.g. the Systems Integrated Research (<http://www.sirplc.co.uk>) Global MFL range, exploit the intelligent branching capabilities of Integrated Learning Systems (ILS) to provide vocabulary and grammar help on demand and to differentiate activities so that each student engages with an appropriate degree of complexity. Others, e.g. the AVP Dix Jeux Français (<http://avp.100megs28.com>), target specific language topics and teaching points. Authoring programs, e.g. Fun with Texts (<http://www.camsoftpartners.co.uk>), come to rescue when teachers perceive the need to compile cloze exercises and other word puzzles of their own. There are also whole-class teaching resources, e.g. Boardworks (<http://www.theboardworks.co.uk>) editable MFL PowerPoint presentations, designed for use with interactive whiteboards and projectors. Tutorial software is meant to complement what teachers do, not to replace them. How well it integrates into classroom practice and meets the needs of individual learners will determine its ultimate effectiveness.

Fourthly, communications technologies can release SEN learners from the confines of the MFL classroom. The Internet is a veritable cornucopia for teachers and learners alike in MFL/SEN. Its World Wide Web (WWW) not only offers topical target language (TL) text, graphics, sound and video but also lesson plans, interactive exercises and educational advice. Email, forums, newsgroups, bulletin boards, audioconferencing and videoconferencing permit teachers and pupils to share ideas and solve problems. The standard browsers Microsoft Internet Explorer and Netscape have proven worth, but alternatives exist. As with word-processing and presentation, however, online tasks must be carefully planned to enable MFL learners with SEN to experience success. After the initial exchange of messages about self, family and pets, class email projects may grind to a halt for want of ideas. Challenging web searches to locate TL information may leave learners “lost in cyberspace”.

Fifthly, assistive technologies may improve the SEN learner’s engagement with the computer and/or the MFL curriculum. **Settings** controlling keyboard, sound, display and mouse options can be customised to the learner’s needs. For example, with “StickyKeys” enabled in Windows, uppercase and foreign characters can be typed using the Shift and Alt keys by pressing and releasing one key at a time. **Devices** with the potential to facilitate SEN learners’ MFL and ICT access are legion. Switches, overlay keyboards, touch-screens and other plug-ins offer data-entry alternatives to typing. Using Optical Character Recognition technology, paper-based text can be transferred from a scanner to a computer or decoded by a handheld “reading pen” (e.g. Quicktionary: <http://www.quick-pen.com>). With their small “footprints”, laptop computers and word processors like AlphaSmart (<http://www.alphasmart.com>) lend themselves to round-table multiple-activity MFL groupwork. **Programs** for speakers of English with SEN now often respond to the challenges of broader curricula and global marketing by supporting other languages. Designed for people with reading difficulties, Kurzweil 3000 (<http://www.kurzweiledu.com>) translates and converts text to speech in Dutch, French, German, Italian and Spanish. French, German and Spanish screens come with My World (<http://www.inclusive.co.uk>), whose use of draggable words and images appeals to the kinaesthetic learner.

Sixthly, the appropriate use of ICT is the key to its effective integration into MFL/SEN classroom practice. A baseline audit of a school’s existing ICT stock ought to precede any plans to expand its repertoire. Special schools are often the best

equipped when it comes to literacy, numeracy, lifeskills and access technologies. Mainstream school networks always have word-processing, spreadsheet, database, presentation, graphics and Internet packages for cross-curricular use. While some subject- and SEN-specific devices and programs are in constant demand within school departments, others languish inside dusty cupboards. Slow learners lacking concentration and demanding attention often find the computer less of a threat to their poor self-esteem. They too will soon grow disaffected, however, if electronic learning results in isolation from peers and a curriculum without breadth, balance and variety. Appropriate use means that ICT is judiciously, purposefully and effectively integrated into MFL classroom practice so that the challenges of the subject and the needs of the learner are both met.

Seventhly, MFL teachers must feel confident and competent when exploiting digital media with SEN learners. They may have benefited from New Opportunities Fund (NOF) training and other supported self-study ICT initiatives designed to impart the requisite computer literacy and pedagogical expertise. Such professional development should not have left them with a rack of off-the-peg solutions, but encouraged them to build problem-solving skills and to match teaching interventions with learning differences. The Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (<http://www.cilt.org.uk>) not only publishes a regular bulletin featuring good practice in MFL/SEN, but also owns the Linguanet Forum and MFLSEN Forum online discussion groups where MFL teachers can debate SEN issues. The British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (<http://www.becta.org.uk>) not only provides downloadable MFL, SEN and ICT information sheets but also hosts the Inclusion website and the SENCo Forum discussion group where questions about MFL and SEN can be answered. Among other SEN resources, I maintain on my own website (<http://www.specialeducationalneeds.com>) an extensive bibliography of modern foreign languages and special educational needs. I have also posted a SEN/ICT workshop where MFL teachers will find web-based tasks, case studies of MFL learners with SEN from autism to visual impairment and an online portal to relevant external sites.

Eighthly, ICT provides an ideal opportunity for research and development in the teaching of MFL to those with additional needs. For example, I identified French handwriting as a barrier to comprehension when my MFL learners received penpal letters. I then conducted a small-scale investigation using computer fonts designed by French primary school teachers to emulate the national cursive script. My research confirmed that a difficulty with handwritten French indeed existed and that the availability of a French handwriting font within a word processor represented a potential solution to the problem. As for development work, ICT can assist in creating MFL resources to accommodate the needs of those with SEN. Over the years, using Microsoft Word, I have produced countless units of work in French and German to compensate for commercial courses whose claims to address the full ability range fall somewhat short of the mark in practice. On my website I have posted a sample unit of work in German and a report about my French handwriting readability research.

Finally, weary MFL teachers facing troublesome classes may well be tempted to deploy ICT as a short-term instrument of control. They will be much better off in the long run, however, if they treat it as a strategy of access to higher achievement and self-esteem for their students with SEN. If they are prepared to ask questions, to listen to the answers, to share ideas and to collaborate with others, they will find the job of differentiating their lessons more manageable and ultimately more rewarding.