

23.1.09 Introduction

We frequently receive requests for information or advice from parents, teachers and student teachers who are interested in the - sometimes unexpected - abilities of children with special educational needs. A recent example of this was an email from a teacher in Italy. We thought her experience, her questions, and the answer provided by Vivienne, might be of interest to other visitors to this website and to this page in particular. Thanks to both for allowing me to post this edited version of their exchange.

Hilary McColl

Children with Asperger's Syndrome in primary school: difficulties with foreign language learning.

The background

My interest in Autism began last year when I went to Ireland as Au-Pair girl. I lived for 3 months with a family where there were two children, two boys, who are affected by Asperger's Syndrome (AS).

For me, living with that family was a sensational experience because I had the opportunity to discover a new way of being, a new world. Of course I suffered defeats but also I had a lot of gratification. I think the boys are great, but they also need a lot of help.

One boy goes to a normal school but doesn't receive the right support. There aren't enough teachers for children with these kinds of problems, or teachers are not well enough prepared (and in Italy it is the same). The boy is very good at maths but not at learning foreign languages. His mother wrote to me:

"He is learning German and French. He doesn't have to learn Gaelic. As with any class, he struggles with organization and concentration. I don't think he's learned much. It's not on my list of things I'm concerned about. I'd rather he learned to read and write our language properly. You see, most kids with autism struggle with speech. A second language may be asking too much. He has a hard time reading and understanding what he just read (reading comprehension). He also has a hard time with writing (penmanship) and getting the thoughts from his brain to his hand fast enough. Creative writing is a huge struggle. You see kids with autism take everything literally. So learning another language, may be very difficult."

The context

The idea of writing a degree thesis about AS originates from my own experience with two brothers suffering from this autistic syndrome. In particular, the thesis considers the condition of the child with AS in primary school. We will describe the autistic syndrome and its linguistic singularities, but we will mainly take into account the difficulties that a child with AS has in learning a foreign language. The paper includes testimonies of parents and of teachers, my memoirs and

some items of law, as a help in better understanding the discomfort and the perseverance of the people who live with a child suffering from AS. The educational and didactic tips are drawn from several interviews with teachers who believe in the scholastic success of our special boys.

I'd like to be a good teacher in the future, a teacher who can help her students in learning a foreign language, students with learning disabilities as well.

The questions

I'm asking you help because I'd like to have detailed information about the acquisition of a foreign language by children with AS. Can they learn a foreign language? What problems do they face in learning a foreign language? and How can we, as teachers, help them?

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Vivienne's response

I presume you followed the link on Hilary's website to the research I did on a similar subject 6 years ago. At that time I was very closely involved in teaching French to a group of 12 secondary aged pupils in a "unit" within a secondary school specifically for young people with autism spectrum disorders. For the last 4 years or so I have been in over all charge of a similar unit, and this has helped me step back a little to see the whole picture.

You ask: can they learn a foreign language? With AS, absolutely, as their language skills, in the widest sense, are average or above, but there will always be a few for whom a language simply is a lot less interesting than mathematical problems! Those with high functioning autism (slightly different to AS) may have struggled to speak at all when young, and I think they find language generally more difficult.

Their problems learning a language relate to motivation (like many other pupils). The more "hands on", fun and relevant to what they are interested in, the better. If at primary level they like the Italian equivalent of Thomas the Tank Engine, then work with your own version of that! Very few with AS don't like computers, but a lot dislike writing (even though they can write), so use computers to engage more reluctant children. Be very specific about what you want them to learn and exactly when the day's learning will be finished; always give instructions visually as well as verbally; deal with environmental issues which can totally distract them, - room too warm, buzzing light fitting, door not closed properly, chairs out of line and so on.

Re. creative writing: This is challenging for those on the spectrum, but it is not relevant at the early stages of learning a language when everything should be simply presented and when doing things literally is good! I have found that if pupils hear a "good" accent in the foreign language they are likely to copy it in

quite a literal way, without worrying what their friends might think about them sounding authentic!

So it's not so much a question of teaching them in an entirely different way to other pupils. True, some may require a little longer to process what you're asking them, so keep instructions short. But generally these pupils will do well where other issues (as I mentioned above) are dealt with and teaching methods are multi-sensory and straightforward, with some humour from time to time to keep them engaged.

Vivienne Wire

Footnote

When we approached the boy's mother for permission to post this on the website she added some recent information:

My son just had his teacher conferences. His French teacher raved about him! She absolutely loves him and is so impressed by his knowledge of the French language. She's astounded by how he can recite all the numbers in French (again, anything mathematical). I was so surprised, but you know, the more I think about it, it makes sense. He is very verbal based in learning. French is taught nearly all verbally. He does great on all verbal test answer and questions.

His spelling of the language needs help, but that's to be expected. So, in looking back at my comments, I'm pleasantly wrong to assume that he wouldn't be good at learning another language. He's now a star pupil!