

Building bridges to inclusive foreign language education through appropriately applied technologies

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Abstract: The subject of this paper is the evolution of a foreign language teachers' pre- and in-service training website at <http://www.specialeducationalneeds.com/case/>, focusing on special educational needs. It features case studies of dyslexia, hearing impairment and moderate learning difficulties, accompanied by problem-solving exercises. It also identifies common issues of classroom practice arising from the use of information and communications technology and encourages problem-solving via external links. It has been successfully trialled with student teachers of foreign languages at a local university and with serving teachers in the modern foreign languages department of the author's secondary school. The paper describes how this website was conceived to raise student foreign language teachers' awareness of special educational needs and information and communications technology, how its external information sources were chosen and how the project aimed to facilitate the process of introducing a foreign language to all 11- to 14-year-olds in English mainstream schools.

In February 1999 I conducted a special educational needs (SEN) and information and communications technology (ICT) workshop for student teachers of modern foreign languages (MFL) at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in the north-east of England. To accompany this half-day session, I designed a website entitled *Applying new technologies appropriately to modern foreign languages* (Wilson 1999a).

I have divided my description of this project into three sections. The first gives an overview of the historical, professional and technological context. In the second, I relate how my teacher education initiative in MFL, SEN and ICT evolved. The third section lists the main outcomes of the exercise.

The Background

In this section I describe the broader context of my project and more especially:

- the policy, principles and practice of including all secondary school students in MFL learning;
- the collaboration of subject teachers and learning support professionals in the delivery of MFL to all students;
- the appropriate application of ICT to MFL classroom practice with particular reference to SEN students.

Languages for all

Ten years ago the British government introduced a National Curriculum requiring all 11- to 14-year-olds, including those with learning difficulties, to follow a MFL course (Whitehead 1990). This 'entitlement', as it became known, was due to be extended to all 14-to-16-year-olds at a later date.

Underlying this policy of languages for all in the 11-16 age group was a recognition that the United Kingdom could compete more successfully in Europe and world-wide if the country discarded its image as a nation of monoglots. In 1988 the then European Community's Ministers of Education had also agreed to make language learning the key to education for European citizenship (McColl 2000).

Another factor promoting languages for all was equality of educational opportunity. For much of the twentieth century, British foreign language learning had remained the virtual preserve of an academic élite. The entitlement of all 11-to-16-year-olds to study a foreign language signaled a new determination to include every school-age student in mainstream education.

On the one hand, turning principle into practice proved something of a challenge for many teachers and students alike. Because grammatical concepts and other 'hard' elements of MFL study cannot be postponed for ever, some teachers argued that learners in difficulty might drop one MFL and start another halfway through their secondary education. Certain SEN professionals wondered too whether teaching MFLs to youngsters with learning difficulties was counterproductive in the light of such students' literacy weaknesses.

On the other hand, British MFL curricula had already grown more inclusive. In the late 1970s, local teachers devised syllabuses and tests based on survival language with school trips abroad in mind. In the 1980s, public examination emphasis shifted from grammar and translation skills to the use of language as a vehicle of communication.

Building through teamwork

In the early 1990s, several projects successfully piloted language teaching to students with special educational needs. A strategic difference between ordinary and special schools and between MFL specialists and specialist teachers of pupils with SEN soon emerged. The first group began with the demands of the subject, the second with the individual needs of the particular student. Successful language learning for all students with SEN ultimately required a skilful and sensitive combination of both approaches.

The MFL/SEN research literature of the 1990s reflected these differences (Wilson 1999b). MFL specialists contributed small, practical, classroom-based studies of the issues of training and support and the implications of specific types of learner. Educational psychologists conducted larger-scale, theory-driven investigations of the second language processing of students with learning difficulties. Such research ranged from an in-depth analysis of a single learner to an extensive, long-term study of numerous 'at-risk' students.

The turn of the millennium, however, promises to bridge the gap between the special educator and the foreign language teacher. In 1999 speakers at the First International Conference on Multilingualism and Dyslexia in the North of England city of Manchester not only disseminated the latest research about the identification of MFL learning difficulties, but also defined multisensory strategies of use in teaching at-risk students. This combination of psychological theory with classroom practice is a continuing trend.

Applying technology appropriately

The principle that ICT may broaden the access of pupils with SEN to the National Curriculum in general, and to the MFL curriculum in particular, was officially recognized from the start. ICT was deemed to offer all students, including those with SEN, learning opportunities which contribute both to MFL development and to students' personal and social development.

Pilot MFL/SEN projects paid tribute to the successful integration of ICT in most schemes of work among the project partners. A review of MFL/SEN literature revealed widespread classroom deployment of ICT too. Later policy documents acknowledge that certain learners require computers and other technological aids to carry out attainment targets in MFLs. All students should be given opportunities, where appropriate, to develop and apply their ICT capability in their study of modern foreign languages

Appropriateness not only means curriculum compatibility but also a sense of ownership by teachers and learners. During my year abroad in France in the late 1960s, I opted for an advanced French for foreigners course at the local university. I was keen to improve my listening skills and was excited at the prospect of using a language laboratory for the first time. All I remember of the experience, however, is vainly grappling in my booth with pattern drills requiring thirty-word sentences to be heard and reproduced at speed from memory in the imperfect tense. Later, as a young teacher of MFL in an English school with a language laboratory, I resolved to set my students more appropriate tasks.

The Project

In this section I turn to the project itself. I describe

- the **design brief** of the project, with special reference to the university education department's remit;
- the **problem-solving** approach characterizing the tasks in the project;
- the **case studies** used in the project to represent a selection of special educational needs.

Design brief

I work in the Metropolitan Borough of South Tyneside in the North East of England. South Shields in the east of the borough is a pleasant seaside resort, burdened with more than its fair share of social, economic and educational disadvantage.

A third of the 1,200 students in my over-subscribed 11-16 comprehensive school, now a Technology College, qualify for free school meals. Typically 30% of the boys and 20% of the girls leave primary education with reading ages two or more years below their chronological ages. Although a tiny minority of these learners later transfer to local special schools, most remain in mainstream education receiving their full National Curriculum entitlement, including MFL.

As a Learning Support Teacher, I am responsible for the 35 boys and girls aged 11-12 with learning disabilities, behavioral difficulties, sensory impairments and other special

educational needs. I also teach French and German to slow learners in the 11 to 14 age-group, often using ICT as a resource.

In the autumn of 1998 the modern languages tutor in the education department of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne invited me to deliver an Initial Teacher Training (ITT) workshop on SEN and ICT. The attendees had graduated with a first degree in one or more MFL and completed a diagnostic teaching practice. At least one was a native speaker of the foreign language she intended to teach. Their ICT literacy skills varied but surpassed those of earlier generations of student teachers. The one-year ITT course had so far delivered just a modicum of theoretical knowledge and practical experience of teaching students with SEN.

Scheduled for an afternoon in February 1999, the workshop had a dual remit:

- Use of ICT, particularly online resources, in MFL teaching;
- Recognition and support of SEN in the MFL classroom.

Since I was reluctant to duplicate the efforts of others, I began with an extensive search of the online and printed literature.

The World Wide Web (WWW) already had a number of sites designed to help MFL teachers with Internet usage. Among them were the Web-Enhanced Language Learning *Treasure Hunt* (WELL 1999) and the *Voilà! Bitte schön!* pages compiled by University of Sheffield student teachers (Woolley and Hamilton 1998). Exploiting such off-the-peg packages might have reduced preparation time and at least partially fulfilled the first requirement of the workshop brief.

If so, the second issue — introducing the student teachers to the principles and methods of including learners with SEN in MFL — remained to be addressed. MFL/SEN literature reviews revealed that most publications came in conventional printed format (Wilson 1999b). Two exceptions were *The Instant Access Treasure Chest* (S. Moore 1999) and a British Dyslexia Association information sheet about MFL teaching and learning (Crombie 1996), which were available online.

So far as I could ascertain, a few websites addressed both issues, although none fully integrated them. The instructional technology site at Longwood College in Virginia offered parallel but separate slide shows on Internet usage (F. X. Moore 1997a) and SEN learners (F. X. Moore 1997b) in MFL.

Over the next few months several meetings were held to consolidate the sequence and content of the workshop. The creation of a dedicated website to accompany the afternoon's proceedings was one of the decisions taken. Such a site would provide hands-on experience on the day and continue to be accessible to any student wishing to review the issues at a later date.

Although this *Applying new technologies appropriately to modern foreign languages* website required many hours of research and planning, it was written in Word 97, saved in HTML and uploaded to its current URL at www.specialeducationalneeds.com/case/ in a single weekend. It broke down into four parts:

- **Web Skills:** text, graphics and file handling routines;
- **Case Studies:** teaching MFL learners with a variety of SEN;
- **Problem Solving:** MFL classroom problems and online solutions;
- **Slide Shows:** PowerPoint presentations charting workshop issues.

The individual pages featured a plain, simple and uniform style to focus attention on the tasks within.

Problem-solving

In ICT-based subject teaching in general, and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) in particular, reflective classroom practitioners must ask themselves: ‘if technology is the answer, what is the question?’ Education remains a very human partnership, founded on social interaction and mutual trust. Wholly computer-administered courses have a variable track record.

The WWW too is best approached with a modicum of skepticism. Although ready-made solutions abound on educational websites, the pre-existing problems may be ill defined. Panaceas seldom prove efficacious when individual teachers apply them to ‘exceptional’ students. SEN learners routinely challenge the belief that a particular tactic ‘never fails.’ Because they need a balance between consistency and variety, even ICT eventually palls as a classroom resource.

When I conducted my first SEN/ICT workshop a number of years ago, one teacher observed: ‘that would not work with my students.’ He had a point. I had presented my teaching strategies without explaining the prior decision-making thoroughly enough. Ultimately, the definition of the initial problem and the rationale culminating in my particular solution mattered, not the solution itself.

So an appropriately defined problem and an appropriately applied problem-solving process precede an appropriate solution. In accordance with this principle, I took pains to devise a practical teaching problem before offering a potential solution in the form of an external link on my website. Sometimes a serving teacher’s question to an online discussion group, e.g. Lingu@Net or SENCO Forum, furnished the problem while the ensuing thread, or replies, exemplified worked solutions, simultaneously enhancing the authenticity of the process.

A problem-solving approach also suited the overall workshop ethos. Imparting information about the theory and practice of SEN and ICT in MFL to passive listeners was never the intention. Raising awareness of classroom diversity and inclusion issues involved brainstorming ideas, questioning beliefs, and challenging stereotypes, e.g. SEN labels are synonymous with low intelligence and motivation.

Finally, problem-solving is a distinctive feature of the social constructivist theory of learning, with which the Russian psychologist and philosopher Lev Vygotsky is often associated. Vygotskian learning theory challenges the conventional wisdom that there is one correct response to every question and that students must acquire a finite body of knowledge before they can arrive at this answer.

Vygotsky's idea that learning is a social and collaborative activity and that students need to construct their own understanding of a problem and its solution has long underpinned curriculum renewal in the United Kingdom. It also defines many current subject-teaching initiatives there, notably the 'Thinking Skills' projects in Humanities, Science and, at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, in MFL.

Case studies

Social constructivism also relies on case-based evidence to provide a meaningful context in which problem-solving can take place (Chen n.d.). A case study has a number of advantages as a MFL/SEN/ICT professional development tool:

- It is a way of exploring a particular aspect of a situation or problem within a limited time span;
- In SEN, the focus is often on multiple agencies contributing different kinds of expertise to the support of one student with learning difficulties;
- ICT action research usually investigates principles and practices within a single institution, department or classroom.

Although rule-based reasoning may have cerebral appeal, a human scenario engages all faculties, including the imagination, and encourages creative problem-solving.

Initially, four case studies were created, each starting with a classroom dilemma, ending with a series of tasks and focusing on a single learner. The first concerned a foreign national whose mother tongue also happened to be the TL in the MFL classroom:

Heidi is a girl in your Year 7 MFL class. She has just arrived from Zurich, where she attended primary school. She speaks Swiss German but very little English. German is the First Modern Foreign Language in your school. You have inherited Heidi because your more experienced fellow-linguists are anxious about the impact of native speakers on their classes. They say she may become frustrated at the slow pace of lessons, confuse other pupils with her non-standard pronunciation of German and out-perform the teacher in the target language. They claim that you are her 'best bet' as you are the most accurate and fluent Germanist in the department.

The Special Needs department has arranged for Heidi to work with a teacher of English as an Additional Language (EAL), who could withdraw her from German lessons if you wished. The Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) has already spoken to Heidi's mother and ascertained that Heidi may have literacy difficulties in German. Heidi's mother wants her daughter to study German at school as the family may return in a few years' time to Switzerland.

Problem 1: How can the school's Modern Foreign Languages and Special Educational Needs Departments collaborate in assessing Heidi's prior learning and in delivering her full National Curriculum entitlement?

Problem 2: Heidi tells you that another pupil is calling her a 'Nazi' because her home language is German. Such verbal abuse is damaging Heidi's self-esteem and undermining your school's commitment to race equality and multiculturalism. You decide to turn Heidi's bilingualism and biculturalism into assets, not liabilities.

I purposely began with a case study of a native TL speaker with reading and writing difficulties because I wanted to provoke any student teacher harboring notions about SEN always meaning disaffection and underachievement.

The other three case studies were designed to illustrate certain major categories of special educational needs, namely:

- Specific learning difficulties (dyslexia);
- Moderate learning difficulties;
- Hearing impairment.

All steered the same course as the foreign national case study, accentuating the positive qualities of the learners without glossing over the discrepancy between what they brought to the curriculum and what the curriculum demanded of them (Wilson 1999a). In the interest of anonymity, the subjects of the case studies represented ‘composite’ characters.

The student teachers were expected to engage twice with this casework portfolio. During the off-computer session, they would debate the native speaker scenario, then form three smaller groups, each entrusted with one of the remaining cases, meeting for a plenary to provide feedback. In the second half of the workshop, they would access the cases on the WWW via a PC or Mac computer. The online version had links leading to external websites where others had grappled with the same problems ‘for real.’

The Outcomes

I duly ran the ‘Applying new technologies appropriately to modern foreign languages’ workshop during the afternoon of February 21, 1999 in the Education Department of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. The choice of a foreign national as the opening case study proved apt, not only because a bilingual student teacher was in the audience, but also because it generated the most heated discussion. Furthermore, each group selected a different case — specific learning difficulties (dyslexia), moderate learning difficulties and hearing impairment — without prompting and unraveled the inclusion issues.

The workshop and its accompanying website were later deployed in:

- In-service MFL teacher training (Internet usage) at Harton School in South Shields;
- Pre-service MFL teacher training (WWW materials development) at the University of Sheffield.

The reception on both occasions was uniformly favorable. Website visitors outside these institutions have also given positive feedback.

One constraint was the current paucity of educational information about MFL and SEN on the WWW. Perhaps reflective classroom practitioners have neither the time, nor the confidence nor the inclination to disseminate even their personal successes when teaching MFL to SEN learners. Psychologists and medical researchers investigating learning disabilities are only too eager to share their own findings.

The extensive planning and research preceding the development of the website certainly proved worthwhile. Recently I added a fifth case study, based on a learner with visual impairment. The success of the website also encouraged me to produce a similar WWW

resource bank for other subjects within my school. To date, I have compiled modules for Design Technology, Geography, History, Mathematics, MFL, Music, Religious Education and Science (Wilson 2000).

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