

Disabled and Multilingual

Introduction

I want to share with you my story about how I coped with being a disabled student in mainstream education, particularly at a university in a foreign country, because I understand better than anyone else that it is not easy to cope if you are hard of hearing, or deaf or even blind. But the decision to do so could also turn your life around. I truly hope that my story will inspire you to do the same.

Background

I am originally from eastern European country but have lived in the UK since I was 21 years old. English became my second language, after my mother tongue. I developed a love for learning English language while in primary school. My first English novel was Jane Austen – Pride and Prejudice. I remember my first encounter with English novels. I walked into that small bookshop and seeing this wonderful novel on the shelf. I fell in love with the title instantly. The price was greatly reduced and I used my pocket money to buy it. Leaving aside my childhood memories, here and right now, I am studying for a doctorate at the university.

About my disability

In terms of disability I have been hard of hearing since I was 1 and a half years old. But, then, I have never really considered myself to be disabled. I could see, talk and still hear to some extent. I remember my father wanted the best for me and was all for sending me to a school for the deaf. I refused. I wanted to be in mainstream school. Even at 10 years old I genuinely believed that I needed this kind of challenge because, after all, I needed to be capable of surviving in the world out there. As for communicating with that world, my communication skills rely heavily on using not just on what I can still manage to hear, but also on lip-reading, and looking out for body language and emotion expressed through speech. All these ‘tools’, as I call them, are absolutely essential to everyday communication – work, TV, and socialising. Without these tools I simply cannot communicate as effectively as possible. So, it is a case of being able to develop and use these tools in the most effective manner. Yet, many hearing people do not realise how tiring it can be. They are also mostly unaware and sometimes hugely embarrassed to say that they simply do not know how to behave towards someone with this kind of disability. Should they start raising their voice or shouting or should they start looking at you with sorrow or even wonder?

My story

My story started in 2001 when I decided to enrol for a research degree. Having just completed MBA, I was not convinced that I wanted to stop learning. I consider education to be an important part of learning more deeply about what are you really like, how you make decisions, how you process, interpret and communicate the information to others, and even how you ought to behave toward others. So, developing your ability to communicate both orally and in writing is a key skill. And this was also a key factor in my decision to continue my education and enrol on one of the research programmes at university in 2001.

This was a turning point for me. I needed the challenge. I also needed the new goal. Until then, I have rarely challenged myself, either at work or through previous studies. I also experienced another problem. Without having any GSCE or A levels, I entered the college as mature student at the age of 25 having decided to start my new career from scratch for various reasons. To begin with, I went through the higher national certificate course lasting 2 years part time while working. Then I went straight into an MBA course, part time again, over a period of a year and half while working full time. Afterwards, I went straight into a research degree course, still working. This brings me up to the present time. In practice, this meant that I had no time to learn how to write in academic fashion. So, academic writing became huge concern for me. It was my main reason for doing a research degree.

During my studies, I have come across many frustrating situations. One such example is research supervision. My experience suggests that many academic staff are completely unaware that when supervising students with a disability like mine they do need to take a different (or, as my supervisor would say, a more *proactive*) approach to supervision and communication. For example, the traditional supervision style is as follows: you write the thesis on your own and report back to your supervisor who then gives you comments. In my case, it became very obvious that it was not going to work. I became dissatisfied. I think it was something to do with being dependent on my little tools. I realised that I tend to learn more about how to speak and respond better when I have intensive one to one sessions with my supervisor, rather than writing my comments on the piece of paper and sending them in. Finally my supervisor recognised it and we changed the approach. Since then progress has been substantial. I think that this has huge impact on my ability to practice speaking, summarising, concluding, thinking, whatever you call it. But it also had the negative impact on the length of the course, taking it longer to complete. I am still here. Speaking of academics' approach, I believe that they should be given mandatory training to learn how to deal with issues of this kind. Yet, I have found myself facing a huge wall. I am still trying to get my point across at my university.

Then there is another example of such situation of, shall we say, *unintentional* ignorance. This time it includes modern languages. As I noted earlier, I had loved learning English, and now I had a passion to learn more languages. I also believe that a research degree should encourage students to take on learning language even if they think that they do not need to do so. Perhaps this is where the negative attitude towards learning and using modern languages in research really starts. Research students should aim to cross the boundaries of research. They should dare to explore the issues in the countries that they little knowledge about. But to do so they have to equip themselves with language skills. So far, this applies to hearing students. But what about deaf or hard of hearing or even blind ones? Don't they deserve the chance to do so too? This is what happened to me: in the academic year beginning 2006, I decided to study three modern languages, Spanish and French at university and Portuguese at the local adult education college because my university did not offer it. It was clearly a big decision because it meant that I was effectively a full time student from then on. It also affected my part time work, and therefore my financial situation, study and socialising. But I thought of it like this: I will never have such a chance in my life again; to be able to focus on learning three languages at once, simply because, when you work full time, there is no spare time for it all, on top of doing a doctorate. So, I thought of it as nice sabbatical leave!

At the very beginning of that academic year 2006 it was obvious to me that I would not be able to learn those languages without extra support - one to one sessions. I quickly identified the problem. The lectures taught in traditional way, using audio tapes with no transcripts, were simply a nightmare for me. I became very frustrated because I couldn't follow quickly enough. Besides, drawing on my experience with English language, I realised that learning to lip-read in these languages is the key thing. I could not rely on audio tapes because you only hear the voices; you can't see the faces. And all language classes spend a large proportion of their time on listening exercises, which were totally useless for me. So I decided to lobby my disability advisor and ask for support sessions. Originally, I argued for two or three support sessions a week for each language. I believe that block of two hours is far more effective than one hour a week because learning to lip-read is actually speech therapy. My LEA did not want to fund it because of recent changes in the law (Disability Discrimination Act 2005) which states that it is the responsibility of the educational institution to provide additional support for disabled students not covered by LEA. Thus, in September 2006, I approached my disability advisor to ask her for this kind of help. I also contacted the language department about it too. I was refused on the grounds that this kind of help could not be provided. So, I spent whole one academic year trying to learn languages in this difficult situation. I was very disappointed. I have since found out that they have never had

student with a hearing disability who has applied for language modules and therefore they had no benchmark that they could use in my case. But I pressed on and in September 2007, prior to the new academic year, I threatened to make a complaint to the Equal Opportunities Commission. This seems to have worked. My disability advisor started to take notice. Within few weeks, she informed me that the faculty had agreed to provide me with one hour of support for each language. But I was not happy because I had already lost one academic year and wanted compensation in hours: at least two hours for each language. My disability advisor could not approve extra hours on the grounds that they had too many students that year. Again, I was disappointed. As there was nothing more I could do about this, I decided to try to make the most of these hours.

Then I came across another disadvantage. Because language module lecturers work part time, this meant that I had to adapt to their schedules instead of them adapting to mine. They offered me the option of having two sessions on days when I was completely busy with other lectures. For example, I had 3 hours of Spanish on Monday mornings between 9 - 12pm, and they were only willing to offer a support session an hour later, at 1pm. I had no choice but to run from one university site to another. After 3 hours of Spanish I was clearly exhausted, let alone having a support session in French!. Besides, lip-reading sessions could be very challenging and tiring. On another occasion, on Thursdays, my Spanish support could only offer a session at 3pm for 1 hour before my 2 hour French session which run in the afternoon between 4 – 6pm. Afterwards I had Portuguese class running from 7 – 9pm. In addition to this, I also worked part-time on Thursdays mornings. So again, I had to run from one site to another.

I think that if the university is to establish this procedure, they would be better to organise schedules around student time, not lecturers. For me it was simply a very inefficient use of resources. I complained to the disability advisor. I received no reply. No one asked me for feedback. But at the end of the day, something good has come out of it. The precedent has been established. The question remains how successful it is going to be. I would love to know that. But I have my doubts about this. The culture has to change. I was shocked to hear one special teacher saying that deaf students do not need to learn modern languages because they do not need them or they cannot cope. How can that be? On the contrary, I believe that there is career for deaf students if they wish to pursue modern language learning. But they need also to be encouraged. How will they feel if things like this happen?

On the other hand, there were teachers who demonstrated their enthusiasm to help me. They tried to work about around my special needs. Some of them gave me the scripts before

the audio lectures. I am very grateful to them for their help. I think that they realised how difficult it must be for me. In such case good interaction and communication between student and teacher is very important. It is also important to set realistic goals. I tried to help them to recognise my weak points, for example, what sounds I cannot hear or recognise well and to develop strategies for addressing each of these weaknesses. They were keen to learn too and I sincerely hope that they did learn something useful and practical too. However, others are still ignorant and refuse to learn from my case. The best thing you can do is to focus on bringing out the best in staff who are enthusiastic and who want to make difference. This is the key thing that leads to change.

Conclusion

Reflecting back on the last two years, learning modern languages has provided me with an extra boost. I can now read, write and speak in five languages. Back then it was very ambitious goal and people were telling me that I will not be able to do so. But I did it. My languages skills are not perfect but I can communicate clearly. The determination to learn despite all sorts of obstacles on the way is the key factor.

Therefore, to other deaf students, undergraduate to postgraduate, I want to say: you have to find new ways to stand out from the crowd. The world is increasingly becoming very competitive place. Knowing languages is one way to achieve this. It is a huge challenge to learn modern languages. But it is **not** impossible. Just look at how you can use those little tools that you already have, wisely and better. For example, you do not need to speak the language in order to produce translated documents. There are many good translating tools available out there. Instead, you can develop good writing and translating skills. Or you can be more daring and use research methods such as web based techniques that require written rather than oral responses. They might be written in other languages. And this is where your challenge should start. Equip yourself with the knowledge that will make you stand out from the rest. I truly wish you the best of luck in that endeavour.

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I would be more than happy to answer questions or provide advice on this matter. You can contact me via the owner of this site. Your message will be passed on. Write to me care of: h.mccoll@clara.co.uk