



How to teach students with special educational needs

Introduction

The term 'special educational needs' (SEN) describes the needs of children who have a difficulty or disability which makes learning harder for them than for other children of the same age. SEN covers a broad spectrum of difficulty or disability, and children may have wide-ranging or specific problems. For example, they could have difficulty with reading, writing, number work, or understanding information. They could have difficulty expressing themselves or understanding what others are saying. There may be sensory or physical needs which affect learning; a medical or health condition may slow down a child's progress or involve treatment that affects their education. Some children may have a particular disorder or syndrome, such as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, Asperger syndrome, or other disorders on the autism spectrum.

This guide is intended as an introduction and overview for teachers who may have students with special educational needs in their English classes. It offers brief descriptions of some commonly identified conditions, and suggests approaches and strategies that may help these students learn more effectively. However, we also recommend that teachers consult specialists in the field for more specific help or support in their own context.

Ways of classifying special educational needs may vary from place to place, but the following four types are widely accepted:

- communication and interaction needs
- cognition and learning needs
- behaviour, emotional, and social development needs
- sensory and/or physical needs.

Dyslexia is dealt with in a separate guide (*How to teach students with dyslexia*) and is therefore not covered here.

Working with students with special educational needs

Many children will have special needs of some kind during their education. Children make progress at different rates or have different ways in which they learn best, and teachers should aim to take account of this in the way they organize and prepare their lessons. Students making slower progress or having particular difficulties in one area will need extra help or different kinds of instruction to help them succeed.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that, although students with special needs may have difficulties in many areas, they will also have areas of strength, for example they may be very creative and have a high degree of curiosity; they may have an ability to think 'outside the box' and see different ways of approaching a problem. Recognizing and utilizing

these strengths is important to students' academic and intellectual development.

The suggestions in this guide for approaches and support strategies should be understood in the following context:

- even within one type of special educational need, there can be large variations between students, and support strategies that work well for one student may not necessarily work for another.
- some students with SEN may have more than one kind of difficulty or disorder, for example, a student with communication and interaction needs may also have behaviour, emotional, and social development needs. This may make it more difficult to identify what support is most effective.

Reducing barriers to learning

Learning a foreign language is an enriching experience for all students, including students with SEN. However, students with SEN require adaptations to the learning environment and modified learning goals to support them with the extra challenges they face. These adaptations often require little effort from the teacher but may have a significant impact on students with SEN. Indeed, classroom conditions for students with SEN may be as much of a barrier to getting to grips with the subject as the cognitive challenges of the subject itself. Teachers should do all they can to minimize these barriers.

Students with special educational needs have more than simply 'differences' or 'difficulties' with learning. They often have a neurological disorder that affects the brain's ability to receive, process, store, and respond to information, and the extent to which this impacts each individual will vary. Information is processed in the brain in different ways, and these differences make it harder to create or strengthen some neural pathways. Therefore, alternative methods of teaching should be used to help neurons build new pathways and make learning a second language possible.

One of the keys to providing effective support for students with SEN is understanding and working with their individual challenges, preferences, strengths, and in some cases, crisis flashpoints. In addition to any support you may receive from your institution or Ministry of Education, you should also think about how you can use your personal knowledge of the student to personalize their learning experience. Knowing which music a student listens to, or whether there is a particular computer game they like, enables teachers to draw on those interests through lesson topics and learning material. Equally, knowing something about the student's background, personal life, and family creates an affective bond which helps lower barriers to learning.



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Communication and interaction needs

Students in this group have speech, language, and communication difficulties which make it hard for them to make sense of language or understand how to communicate effectively and appropriately with others. This group includes students with speech, language, and communication needs, autism spectrum disorder, and Asperger syndrome.

Speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN)

Students with SLCN have difficulty with specific aspects of communication. This may be minor and temporary, or more complex, and development of speech may be substantially behind their peers. Students with SLCN may

- have significant problems with grammatical accuracy
- have a reduced vocabulary
- find it hard to recall words
- have difficulty expressing their ideas
- have difficulty making themselves understood
- have difficulty understanding information communicated verbally
- have difficulty with social functioning.

Autistic spectrum disorder (ASD)

The way students with ASD receive and process information is influenced by differences in the way the brain and central nervous system develop in early childhood. ASD is a spectrum condition, and so these students are affected by the condition in different ways. Some may be able to function in a relatively independent way at school and at home, whilst others need permanent specialist support. Students with ASD may

- have trouble understanding and using non-verbal and verbal communication
- have difficulty understanding social norms and rules, which affects their ability to relate to others
- have a poor understanding of how to think and behave flexibly
- have a tendency to focus obsessively on restricted or repetitive activities
- be extremely sensitive to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light, or colours.

Asperger syndrome

Asperger syndrome is a form of autism, and is sometimes referred to as high functioning autism. Students with Asperger syndrome are often of average or above average intelligence. They have fewer problems with speech than students with ASD, but may still have difficulties with understanding and processing language. They also have problems with verbal and non-verbal

communication. They do not understand non-verbal signals and have a different sense of interpersonal distance. For example, they may feel extremely uncomfortable if people get too close to them, and this can cause an uncontrollable attack of anger. These students are often underachievers – they may be able or gifted, but obtain very poor grades.

Autistic spectrum disorder, including Asperger syndrome, is often discussed from the perspective of its challenges and problems, and the positive educational and intellectual aspects are easily overlooked. The cognitive strengths of some students with ASD mean that they are capable of focusing on certain tasks without breaks in concentration, and many people with ASD report that they place great value on their unique way of seeing the world. Indeed, a number of very successful famous people are believed to be autistic, including Tim Burton (film maker), Daryl Hannah (actress), Temple Grandin (author and activist), Dan Aykroyd (actor), Matt Savage (jazz pianist and composer), and Susan Boyle (singer). ASD is often seen as a disorder but it might be more constructive to see it as a set of physical and neurological characteristics that in many cases accompany a highly developed sensitivity and talent.

Cognition and learning needs

This broad category includes all students who learn at a slower pace than their peers. This can take the form of a specific challenge such as dyslexia (difficulties with literacy), dyscalculia (difficulties with numeracy), dyspraxia (difficulties with physical coordination), or a more generalized difficulty with cognitive processing, which ranges from severe learning difficulty (SLD) to moderate learning difficulty (MLD).

Moderate learning difficulty (MLD)

As a teacher, you may well come across students with moderate learning difficulty. MLD is sometimes referred to as a 'global' or 'generalized' condition. It is used to refer to students who have difficulty with some of the work in school, and with keeping up with students in their age group. These students will have attainments well below expected levels in all or most areas of the curriculum, even with the right support. Students with MLD have much greater difficulty than their peers in acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills, and in understanding concepts, and may also have speech and language delay. This can lead to low self-esteem, problems with concentrating or staying on task, and finding it hard to develop social skills. Students with MLD may

- have trouble understanding and following instructions
- find tasks that involve sequencing very difficult



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- have problems with physical coordination
- find it hard to remember information and instructions
- appear to be generally disorganized.

Behaviour, emotional, and social development needs

This is a broad category that includes students whose behaviour or state of mind acts in some way as a barrier to learning. This might manifest itself in a number of ways. For example, they can be aggressive and disruptive to other students' learning; they can be hyperactive and unable to concentrate for more than a short time; or they may have severe difficulties managing their relationships with other people. Students with these needs often find it difficult to trust others, and this makes forming relationships with other students and adults very hard. They do not generally suffer from any specific cognitive disorder or physical impairment, but their emotional and behavioural issues tend to create barriers to learning. In this sense, it can be said that learning difficulties and behaviour difficulties often feed on each other. This group also includes hyperkinetic disorders, which are characterized by restlessness, excessive physical activity, and impulsive behaviour. The main disorders in this category are attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD), and Tourette's syndrome.

Attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD)

There are two main types of ADHD, and a third type which is a combination of the two main types. The first type is known as hyperactive-impulsive ADHD. Children with this type of ADHD are usually diagnosed at a younger age than those with other types, and display the following characteristics:

- They move and fidget constantly and talk non-stop.
- They have trouble with quiet activities and controlling temper outbursts.
- They often act without thinking about the consequences of their actions.
- They have trouble taking turns and often disrupt games and conversations.
- They do not contribute actively during group work.
- They tend to disrupt others and prevent them from doing their work.
- They have trouble remembering and following complex instructions.

The second type is known as inattentive ADHD. Children with this type of ADHD have trouble putting the required attention and effort into their schoolwork. This type of ADHD is more easily missed at an early

age, and the difficulties only become apparent when responsibility for schoolwork and managing their own lives increases. Children with this type of ADHD may display the following characteristics:

- They appear not to pay attention to details or to listen when spoken to.
- They daydream a lot and do not sustain attention long enough to learn something new.
- They are slow to process information and struggle to follow instructions.
- They usually have problems with long-term projects in which there is no direct supervision.
- They become bored easily and are poorly organized.
- They often forget to write down homework tasks, or forget to do the homework itself, or they may do the homework but forget to bring it to school.

Sensory and/or physical needs

This category includes students with visual and/or hearing impairments, or a physical need that means they must have additional support and equipment.

Visual impairment

Visual impairment may range from partial sight to complete blindness. With the exception of those who suffer from complete blindness, most students will have some sight and find it easier to see in certain light conditions than others. 'Functional vision' is a term which refers to what visually impaired students can see, rather than what they can't.

Hearing impairment

Students with a hearing impairment range from those with mild hearing loss to those who are profoundly deaf. Technology to amplify or enhance sound for hearing impaired students is widely available. Hearing aids and cochlear implants allow students to function in a similar capacity to students with normal hearing. Some schools now have technology such as FM systems and induction loop systems that greatly reduce background noise and help hearing impaired students hear better in noisy environments.

Practical approaches and strategies

Some of the difficulties facing learners with SEN are due more to methodological approaches than cognitive challenges; it's not that they can't learn what we want them to learn, but rather that they can't learn it in the way we want them to learn it. Sometimes teachers unconsciously erect barriers which make language learning seem more difficult than it needs to be, and this affects students with SEN more than others.



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As a general principle it is important, at both the syllabus and the lesson planning stage, to identify possible barriers to learning for students with SEN. For example, the barriers might be the language you use to explain a grammatical point, or the way you give instructions, or the font size of a reading text, or the difficulty level of a sequence of activities. Having identified possible barriers, you should then plan ways to eliminate or reduce these barriers.

This section suggests practical strategies and approaches for reducing barriers. Most of them are useful for a range of different kinds of students with SEN. Some of them are relevant to just one or two groups of students with SEN.

Dealing with memory problems

Working memory is important in a learning context, and in students with special educational needs it is either poorly developed, or in some cases damaged. Working memory is used to hold small amounts of information temporarily, such as instructions for carrying out an activity, and is designed to save long-term memory from becoming overloaded with information that we only need briefly. It also uses up very little brain capacity, so that we can recall the instructions and carry out the activity itself at the same time. For many students with SEN this is very difficult; they quickly become overwhelmed and cannot remember what they need to do. Unfortunately, it is easy for teachers to misinterpret this as a sign that the student doesn't listen to instructions.

You can use a range of approaches to help students with this difficulty, including:

- trying to break up instructions and information in general into smaller chunks, pausing regularly to give the student time to take in the information before carrying on
- creating connections where possible between new information and known information or remembered experience. For example, you might say *Use the information in the text to fill in the boxes ... like we did in the lesson yesterday about camping, remember?*
- using a 'buddy' system in class; the SEN student's buddy can help with the steps of the learning activity.

Other aspects of memory also need continual support and development. The following approaches may help:

- allowing students to use resources such as their vocabulary notebooks during lesson activities and assessments
- reinforcing learning using visual materials, realia, or activities involving movement, to enhance learning through a range of sensory channels

- making sure that students have a range of enjoyable ways to consolidate new knowledge, such as using computer software
- using memory games to help students develop working memory, e.g. write some words on the board, rub out one word, and ask the students to tell you which word has been rubbed out
- helping students to find their own strategies to support memory.

Giving instructions

It is important to give clear instructions and not to overload students with information. Present new information in small chunks and give students short or small tasks to perform. Highlight key points in the instructions so that students can focus on what is important. Allow students enough time to understand the task you have set, and check that your instructions have been understood. If possible, avoid lengthy instructions consisting of different pieces of information, and instead break them down into smaller steps. For example, if one part of the instructions involves regrouping the students into small groups, do this first before giving any further instructions.

For more complex sets of instructions, you can support students by providing key words written on cards. They can use these cards to check they have completed one stage of an activity before moving on to the next stage. For example, the activity might involve three stages: (1) reading a gapped text, (2) writing the missing words in the gaps, (3) checking with a partner to see if they have the same answers. Each card would be numbered 1 to 3 and contain a single word: (1) Read, (2) Write, (3) Check.

It is also helpful to establish a fixed procedure for a particular task or sequence of activities so that students with SEN associate learning tasks with a specific pattern of classroom behaviour.

Making accommodations

Making accommodations for students with SEN involves making specific modifications to the way they study and are assessed. This does not necessarily mean modifying the content of lessons, but rather it will allow students with SEN to study in ways that work around their impairment or difficulty, thus reducing barriers to learning. Some examples of ways in which you could make accommodations are:

- making sure the student sits in a seat where he or she will benefit most from the lesson
- allowing the student to use a computer for reading tasks so that they can see the text in a large font size



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- providing some of the lesson material in advance, preferably focusing on key points, so that it is not completely new to the student during the lesson
- giving alternative or modified homework
- allowing additional time for classroom tasks, projects, and assessment, where possible
- providing oral rather than written assessment for students who have difficulty with reading and writing
- arranging for the student to take exams and tests in a separate, quiet room.

Making effective use of technology

Digital technology can help students with SEN overcome many of their communication and sensory difficulties, and give them fuller access to the language curriculum, for example:

- For students who find handwriting difficult, the use of a computer helps them record their work more easily.
- For students who have difficulty with all aspects of the written medium, speech-to-text software is now readily available and reliably accurate.
- Tablets and other mobile devices are even more access-friendly than desktop and laptop computers. For instance, the majority of students with SEN can enlarge text on screen with a simple movement of one hand.
- Students with a visual impairment can be helped through the use of different coloured screens and fonts; images, icons, and fonts can be enlarged as necessary. On certain mobile devices such as the iPad®, assistive touch can guide students with a visual impairment around the screen and particular gestures can be recorded for students with restricted movement.
- Devices such as a wireless mouse, a foot-controlled mouse, or a head-controlled mouse can help learners with physical difficulties to use a computer.
- Much of the better known generic software, such as Microsoft® Office, contains accessibility facilities for disabled students. For students with coordination difficulties, mouse speed and number of clicks to open a document can be varied, and 'sticky keys' can be set up so that one key does the job of two.
- For students with behaviour, emotional, and social development needs, using the computer enables them to have periods in a quiet, safe environment where they are likely to be more motivated.

In addition to these benefits, there is now a wide range of online resources that address special educational needs. Three examples are given below. They are not intended to be specific recommendations, but merely to show examples of useful support. They are available at the time of writing, but it is worth finding out what

resources may already be in use in other departments in your school, as well as checking periodically what new products become available as this is an area that is developing rapidly.

Load2learn is a website that provides learning resources in downloadable, accessible formats for learners who have difficulty reading standard printed books. <https://load2learn.org.uk>

Widgit is a program that enables students to develop their reading and writing supported by a system of symbols that represent single words. Using the symbols in conjunction with the words they represent, students learn to use a symbol coding system that is effectively an interim stage to traditional reading and writing using the standard alphabet. <http://www.widgit.com>

Kar2ouche enables students with autistic spectrum disorder to 'walk their way' through video scenarios that the teacher creates with easy to use software. The underlying idea is that this helps them identify and empathize with people in social situations in a way that is more immediate than via text or audio alone. <http://www.immersiveeducation.eu/index.php/kar2ouchepg>

Using drama

Students with special educational needs often lose confidence in learning because they can feel frustrated when their progress is slow. Using drama activities can tap into their creativity, stimulate their self-esteem, and enable them to experience success. Drama provides a fictional context and a safe place for these students to learn and participate.

Organizing learning

Many students with SEN have difficulty organizing different aspects of their study: lesson materials, homework, deadlines, etc. Make sure that these students have an effective way of keeping all the material that goes with their English classes, such as a good folder which allows them to organize and store their work. At the end of the lesson, allow time for students to organize their materials and homework. If necessary, make sure that students have a system or follow a fixed routine for writing down assignments and recording important dates.

Adapting classroom conditions

Factors such as the way the classroom is organized, how the chairs or desks are arranged, and what kind of lighting is available will have an impact on how well students with SEN learn. Here are examples of some possible classroom scenarios:

- For students with attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD): to reduce distractions to a minimum they should sit



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away from windows and away from the door. In most circumstances the best seat is right in front of the teacher's desk.

- Students with ADHD work better when desks are arranged in rows as this gives them a sense of structure and order; sitting in a circle can be distracting for them.
- For students with a visual impairment: windows should have blinds to reduce glare, and there should be good quality ambient lighting in the classroom. Students with a visual impairment should be seated where there is a direct sight line of the teacher and the board or screen.
- For students with a hearing impairment: reduce distracting background noise as much as possible. When not in use, or whenever feasible, turn off equipment such as air-conditioning and projectors. Thick rugs, heavy curtains, cork noticeboards, and tennis balls stuck on the ends of chair legs also help to reduce background noise. Students with a hearing impairment need to see your face clearly, in order to lip-read and see your facial expressions, so do not stand with your back to the window and make sure that there is adequate light on your face. For whole-class discussions, arrange desks in a circle if possible, so that they can see all the other students.

Providing motivation

Motivation is a key support strategy for students with SEN. The risk of non-engagement due to weak academic results, poor self-image, and general frustration with learning is greater than with most students, so it is even more important to find ways of motivating these students. Better motivation leads to better participation, which leads to better learning.

Most students respond well to learning material that appeals to their interests outside the classroom, and a teaching approach that focuses on students' interests is often an important ingredient in creating a positive and engaging classroom environment. A simple example of this might be getting students to tell each other about something they did recently, or a place they have visited. This also sends the message that you are interested in your students, and this personal interest is a powerful motivating force.

Another way to motivate students is to allow them to use a medium they particularly enjoy. For example, if a student likes using a certain mind-mapping software, build in ways in your lesson plan for them to use that software.

Giving praise

Most students respond well to positive reinforcement and students with SEN are no different in this regard. Notice how individual students respond to different ways of praising and reinforcing success (not all students are comfortable receiving praise in front of the rest of the class, for example). Use the approach that seems to work best for them.

Working with other students

Collaborative small group work is an excellent way of developing good classroom social skills. When it works well, group work is an enjoyable way of practising language, and it enables students to work both collectively and at their own level. For students with SEN it is also an opportunity to clarify problems without drawing attention to themselves in front of the whole class. Group work also gives teachers the opportunity to arrange students in combinations of balanced personalities, e.g. more settled students with students who find it difficult to maintain concentration, stronger students with weaker students, more imaginative and less imaginative students.

One activity that can work well for these students is whole-class drilling. For example, when practising new language, get the whole class to stand up; half of the class then asks the questions while the other half answers. In this way, nobody feels singled out, and students with SEN are able to participate more freely and with less stress.

Consider also using small group work as a good opportunity to develop SEN students' autonomy, gradually over a period of time. For example, the students with SEN work in the same group as their buddy, or another supportive student, and ideally teacher intervention is gradually reduced so that the students with SEN begin to develop some independence.

Encouraging social integration

The way students with SEN perceive themselves in relation to their peers has a strong impact on their self-esteem and learning. Feeling that they are part of the class or feeling that they are isolated and excluded from the class ultimately affects many aspects of their educational performance. In many countries there is a high incidence of bullying of students with SEN, and a significant part of this is due to a lack of understanding among other students of the issues that students with SEN live with. Although there are some elements of social integration that teachers cannot do anything about, they can and should do everything in their power to ensure that students understand the nature of the difficulty or disability affecting their classmates, and to promote an empathetic attitude towards them.



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Promoting active participation

Students who find it hard to sit still and concentrate need opportunities to participate actively, rather than doing too many quiet activities such as listening or writing. Where possible try to give students with attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder active roles. For example, if the class is working on a gap-fill text, give the student the task of writing the missing words on the board.

If students find it difficult to sit still and listen for lengthy periods of time, set more manageable targets for them of, for example, five minutes, gradually increasing the target over time, and with a system of incentives and rewards to encourage them.

Providing structure and predictability

Students who regularly experience emotional distress or anxiety need a great deal of structure and predictability in the classroom. At times when you sense an imminent crisis, and perhaps also just after a crisis has occurred, many students with SEN need order, calm, and tasks that are relatively undemanding. They are reassured by routine and knowing exactly what is expected of them, so it is important to establish classroom routines and to display rules, and aim to repeat them whenever necessary in a clear and firm manner.

Dealing with behaviour issues

In many contexts, teachers working with students with SEN need to deal with behaviour problems that are more demanding than usual. There is not space here to do justice to such a big topic, but a number of principles can be stated briefly:

- To avoid behaviour that regularly takes your time and attention away from other students, agree a couple of warning signals with the student in question. This could be a hand signal, a tap on the shoulder, or an agreed word.
- If you have to discuss a student's behaviour, do so after class, in private, to avoid the possibility of confrontation or argument in front of the rest of the class.

- Bear in mind that for many students with SEN, bad behaviour is often rooted in more complex reasons than with other students, and that some or all of it may be caused by feelings of frustration due to the learning challenges or class environment.
- Where possible, try to promote and teach positive social behaviour and norms as an integral part of your English lessons.
- Most importantly, don't blame your students for their behaviour. It is neither their fault nor yours.

Keeping a positive focus

Students who have behaviour issues can go into a downward spiral if the only feedback they get in school is negative. If they develop poor self-esteem as a result, it is likely to make their behaviour worse. It is therefore essential to try and address behaviour problems in a positive way. For example, praise achievements where appropriate, and use eye contact and non-verbal signals, wherever possible, to let the student know when their behaviour is inappropriate.

Useful websites

You can search the Internet to find more information, lesson plans, teaching ideas, and other kinds of support. Here are some English-language websites that you may find useful.

- Languages without Limits aims to support language teachers in making effective provision for learners of all abilities. It contains a wide range of information and resources. www.languageswithoutlimits.co.uk
- The Training and Development Agency for Schools in the UK has produced a useful document on including students with SEN and/or disabilities in the foreign language classroom.
<http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/13801/1/modernforeignlanguagesmfl.pdf>



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www.oup.com/elt/oxfordteachersacademy