



Teaching ESL to Children with Communication Disorders

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This project shows how an innovative approach involving collaboration between the ESL specialist, the music specialist, and the classroom teachers can be effective with primary cycle 1 students with communicative disorders such as dysphasia.

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Dysphasia:

- ⇒ Is a persistent problem with verbal communication characterised by slow and atypical development of oral understanding and expression
- ⇒ Can have an effect on:
 - Comprehension
 - Expression
 - Metalinguistic skills and awareness
 - Abstract thinking
 - Ability to generalise

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What does that mean for learning?

- ⇒ Students have difficulty working with abstract notions
- ⇒ Students may have difficulty with spatial relations
- ⇒ Students have difficulty understanding complex sentences and sentences expressed in passive voice
- ⇒ Students may not be able to distinguish between consonant sounds, especially « b » & « p » or « f » & « v »

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- ⇒ Students may find it difficult to follow stories, games or roleplays
- ⇒ Some students cannot copy from the board into a notebook
- ⇒ Students may have a limited vocabulary in their L1 and be constantly searching for the right word to say what they mean. When faced with speaking in English, they are really lost.

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What we did:

- ⇒ Tested the children in 3 classes of Primary Cycle 1 Communication Disorders
- ⇒ Tested the children in 4 regular classes, cycle 1
- ⇒ Developed an integrated approach to teaching by using a similar theme that the students were learning about in their other classes, and creating or adapting songs and stories for the ESL and music classes on that theme.
- ⇒ Reinforced vocabulary knowledge through singing songs and reading stories in English that students had been exposed to in French in regular and music classes.

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What we found:

1. Children with communication disorders appear to learn ESL at approximately the same rate as their peers when in Cycle 1, although the age range is different.
2. Despite their difficulties with communication, these children appear to enjoy learning English as a second language and are proud of their progress.
3. Specific approaches are found to be more effective with these children, such as:

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Examples of effective approaches:

- ⇒ Action songs
- ⇒ Stories
- ⇒ Opportunities to manipulate material
- ⇒ Lots and lots of repetition
- ⇒ Lots of visuals

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Steps to take:

1. Meet with the classroom teacher to determine themes to cover and share story books.
2. Meet with the music teacher to choose the songs to teach the children.
3. Translate the songs (and books) into English, and add actions to the songs.
4. Make up visuals on small pieces of cardboard.
5. Teach the songs and actions in English class, using the visuals.
6. Ask for cooperation of classroom teachers to have students practice the songs outside of English class.

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What happened?

- ⇒ The students loved hearing the stories in English that they knew in French.
- ⇒ The students learned to sing the songs in both English and French using the actions.
- ⇒ The students presented the songs in a small concert for their parents.

Impact on the students:

- ⇒ Increased motivation and self-esteem
- ⇒ Knowledge of English vocabulary

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Successes and challenges of this project:

- ⇒ Students are enthusiastic about learning English and are able to remember vocabulary.
- ⇒ It helped the ESL teacher become more self-confident about teaching these children.
- ⇒ This approach requires a lot of time to meet with colleagues, prepare materials, etc.
- ⇒ New materials constantly need to be created because some students are kept back in the same groups so you cannot use the same materials year after year.

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Suggestions for teaching ESL to children with communication disorders

1. Be very organised because you need a lot of material and you need to be very well prepared for each class.
2. Use trial and error to find out what works.
3. Include lots of repetition in your classes. Be patient!
4. Find out the particular background of each student so that you know what they are capable of doing.
5. Always do the actions with the songs.

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6. When choosing books to read, find ones that are colourful, textured, interactive (lift the flap), but do not have too much text.
7. Use pictures that students can manipulate themselves for vocabulary and sentence building.
8. The teacher's enthusiasm for the subject is really important. The students are very perceptive to this.
9. Build routines into your classes so students feel secure.
10. Tell students in advance how much time they have left to complete an activity to help with transition.