



## **IATEFL's newest Special Interest Group: Inclusive Practices and Special Educational Needs**

There are sixteen Special Interest Groups (SIGs) within IATEFL (the International Association of Teachers of English as Foreign Language). These groups are formed of IATEFL members who wish to focus on one particular aspect of English language teaching (ELT), and explore the issues that arise within that area. The sixteenth group to form, 'Inclusive Practices and Special Educational Needs' (IP&SEN) was set up in 2016, as a response to the rising global awareness of diversity in our language classrooms, and has a broad remit, as will be explained below. It now has over a hundred members, and the current committee comprises 7 teachers / teacher trainers based in 6 different countries, who between them have a wealth of experience of working with students and colleagues who encounter various barriers to learning in the classroom. In this short article, the most common of these barriers will be described, and the activities of the IP&SEN SIG will be outlined. First, though, it is important to unpack the complex terminology of 'Inclusive Practices and SEN', so as to avoid any misunderstandings.

### **Terminology**

Any field of human activity requires specific vocabulary to describe situations and define concepts. Inclusive Practices in education is no exception. The term 'Special Educational Needs' (SEN) is used in many countries around the world, but encompasses different 'needs' in different places. In the UK, for example, where IATEFL is based, it includes:

- Having any form of learning difference and disability, whether visible or hidden;
- Being especially gifted in a particular area;
- Being a member of a gypsy / traveller community;
- Living in the care of the local authority, rather than with family members;
- (In the case of children) acting as a carer for other family members (e.g. taking responsibility for siblings because a parent is ill or absent).

That is not the case in all countries, of course, where 'SEN' may be used only to refer to students with known or visible disabilities. It is a term that is widely recognised, though, and signals an acknowledgment that not all of our students will enjoy the same level of access to the classroom, the teaching materials, and the curriculum. However, it is a term that is contested, even rejected by some practitioners, because when we describe

some learners' needs as 'special' we are defining them as 'unusual' or 'other', rather than accepting that all of our learners have individual needs, and that it is our responsibility, as teachers, to meet them. Sometimes learners who have 'SEN's are contrasted with 'normal' learners, or referred to directly as 'SEN' (as in "She is SEN" / "That is the SEN group"), which dehumanises students and further distances them from their peers.

This is why, when the SIG was formed, the name 'Inclusive Practices' (IP) was chosen, with SEN added, because of its wide recognition. 'Inclusion' in education can be thought of as the process of creating a learning environment where everybody feels they belong, regardless of the individual differences that are an intrinsic part of any group of people. Inclusive Practices are the actions that we take to facilitate inclusion in our classroom, ensuring that every member of the group is motivated and supported to contribute to this environment, and work with others to achieve their best results.

The term 'Inclusion' is also criticised by some, however, because of the potential for the majority (or dominant) group (whether defined in terms of ethnic or linguistic background, gender, age, or physical / cognitive functionality) to expect people who do not match this profile to adapt to their ways of working. In other words, to integrate and assimilate, rather than to contribute their individuality to the group culture. Sadly, it is true that in some situations, the term 'inclusion' has been misappropriated and applied to exclusionary practices, simply in order to fulfil criteria on an inspection schedule, or to appease activists who are seeking to make the school or college more accessible and inclusive. In these cases, we should use the appropriate terms ('exclusion' / 'integration' / 'assimilation') and reserve 'inclusion' for instances where full group membership and access to the curriculum are genuinely the goals of the organisation.

### **The remit of the IATEFL IP&SEN SIG**

It was noted above that the IATEFL IP&SEN SIG has a broad remit, and this is because there is immense diversity in any ELT classroom, even if it is not immediately visible. At first glance, a teacher might perceive that their new class consists of thirty 14-year-olds from the local neighbourhood, with a relatively homogenous ethnic make-up and proficiency in the local language. When they get to know the learners better, they will probably find that there are some children whose home lives are not very stable; one or two might be very anxious, lacking self-esteem or dealing with emotional issues that manifest as undesirable behaviours. It may come to light that some of the students speak different languages at home, either with one or both parents, and have experience of different cultural customs. One child may have a serious illness that requires medication and frequent hospital appointments; another might have limited vision or hearing. Some students might need to hear something four or five times before it sinks in; several will need longer to copy material from the board than the fastest

writers. There may even be a student coming to terms with a non-binary sexual orientation or gender identity. All of these individual differences contribute to the culture of the group, and teachers need to be aware of how they may impact on learning, whether positively or negatively.

To succeed in this, we must acknowledge that everybody experiences barriers to learning at some point, whether temporarily or long-term. For some this will be due to emotional or mental health issues (a bereavement, or a feeling of social exclusion), others will face barriers because of physical or cognitive differences (a broken arm, or a specific learning difference). Individual qualities and attributes interact with the environmental factors and determine how any issues may manifest in the classroom. So, the way in which we manage our classrooms, and nurture an inclusive culture, can have a dramatic impact on how significant the effects of these barriers are.

The remit of the IATEFL IP&SEN SIG is therefore not limited to physical disabilities (such as sensory impairment) and cognitive differences (such as dyslexia / neurodiversity), although many teachers feel that these are the main barriers to learning encountered by their learners. It also encompasses social, emotional and behavioural barriers to learning, which could be related to differences in:

- ethnicity
- cultural expectations
- socio-economic status
- gender (including non-binary identities)
- linguistic repertoire
- sexual orientation (including non-binary identities)
- mental health (e.g. anxiety, depression)

Few teachers can find the time to study enough to become 'expert' in all of these different aspects of the human experience. That is why an inclusive approach is so valuable. Rather than having to know everything about each potential barrier, we can adapt our teaching practice to make the classroom as accessible as possible to as many students as possible, while staying alert for learners who are not thriving, and further adapting our practice to accommodate them as we go. This is what is meant by 'Inclusive Practices'.

**What are inclusive practices in ELT?**

The foundation of inclusion is good relationships. We need to take time to get to know our learners, and to help them to get to know each other, too. We should find ways to celebrate each person's individuality and what they bring to the group, whether that is academic ability, life experience, or a personal attribute that enhances the group dynamic. As teachers, we need to model respect and acceptance of all members of the group, and demonstrate that we expect our students to do the same.

We could also consider the lay-out of the classroom (if that is within our power) and think about how we can position or move furniture so that students can work in groups, as well as individually and in plenary. Some students may need to sit closer to the board/screen or teacher, in order to concentrate better. Others may feel safer near the door, with an understanding that they will signal if they need to leave the confined space. Communication is key to understanding the barriers that individual learners experience, so having a system in the classroom whereby all learners can indicate how they are feeling can be very helpful. This could be a traffic light system (coloured cups or cards on each desk) or agreed hand signals so that the teacher can check the mood in the group, and with individuals.

Where it is possible, teaching materials should be selected that are clearly laid out, using a font that is easy to read, and colours that do not cause too much visual disturbance for sensitive eyes (i.e. reducing the contrast between black text and a white background by tinting the background or using coloured text.) Some learners may like to use coloured overlays on their books to change the colour of the background, some may like to use a 'text-window' (two L-shaped pieces of card that can be moved to form a frame around a section of text or a particular exercise) to reduce the amount of visual input that they need to process at once.

Whenever trying out a new way of working in the classroom, it is important to remember that 'One Size Does Not Fit All'. There is nothing that works for everybody, and it takes some experimentation and reflection to find out what works best for any particular student or group.

### **What IP&SEN SIG does**

So, how could the IATEFL IP&SEN SIG help teachers to implement inclusive practices in their classrooms? From our website (<https://ipsen.iatefl.org/>) you can find information and resources to help teachers understand some of the issues around inclusion and exclusion of all types. There is also a monthly update of events that are going on around the world, that may be of interest in this field. Our newsletter comes out twice a year packed with articles, tips and experiences shared by teachers round the world. Both the website and the newsletter carry news about face-to-face and on-line events that IP&SEN SIG are running, often in collaboration with other groups.

In addition, we offer a mentor scheme, through which we try to match experienced colleagues with teachers seeking ideas to deal with a new experience. It may be the first time you have a visually-impaired learner in your class, or you may have been asked to tutor a child with AD(H)D privately, and are feeling that it would be good to chat with somebody who has done this before, to give you some moral support or practical advice. That is where a mentor can be a useful ally.

Get in touch (email: [ipsensig@iatefl.org](mailto:ipsensig@iatefl.org)) or find us on [social media](#) if you would like to join us in our work to make the language classroom a more inclusive environment for all.

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