# Managing an 'Inclusive' Classroom

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## INTRODUCTION

**CONCEPTS OF INCLUSIVITY AND AN 'INCLUSIVE' CLASSROOM IN THE** context of language learning and study are oft used but perhaps not easily defined. There is an assumption that inclusivity, and the inclusive classroom, simply pertain to the idea that all members of a group of learners are 'adequately involved' in the learning process. This thinking, however, ignores the complex and fluid nature of inclusivity and whether each member of a class actually truly feels 'included' in their respective educational settings (Nilholm & Alm, 2010). With this in mind, this paper looks at some very practical issues and challenges facing an educational facilitator when they are considering how best to optimise their language learning sessions to make them as inclusive as possible, especially in view of learning differences between individual learners. We will start by outlining some definitions of the term inclusive. This will be followed by an overview of how attempts to improve inclusivity fit into the 'ideal' language-learning environment. There will then be a look at 'learning difficulties' and how this issue impacts on considerations of inclusivity. Finally, there will be a tying together of all these concepts.

## Concepts of Inclusivity in the Classroom

### A Definition of 'Inclusive'

One primary factor contributing to the multiple conceptions of inclusivity across teacher discourse is that inclusive research and policy initiatives have stemmed from a range of sub-disciplines including multicultural education, special education, anti-racist education, queer education and the education of women. Clearly, arriving at a one-size-

fits-all definition of an inclusive classroom is difficult, perhaps even impossible. Investigation of this topic throws up myriad papers outlining how organisations involved in education should frame their ideals with regards to educational inclusivity.

However, where educational organisations and government bodies are usually required to outline their visions of 'inclusivity' to underpin their policy making and regulations, I would argue that a teacher in a classroom setting does not need to go to these lengths and can, and should, show flexibility when looking to create a truly inclusive learning environment.

It is not surprising that views on inclusivity in the classroom that are more directly applicable to the individual teacher in the language classroom can be found from sources created by organisations that are more involved in the day-to-day management of the classroom. It was in one such place that this definition was forwarded:

> *'An inclusive classroom climate refers to an environment where all students feel supported intellectually and academically and are extended a sense of belonging in the classroom regardless of identity, learning preferences, or education'* (Inclusive Classroom Climate | Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, 2021).

The part about 'regardless of identity, learning preferences, or education' is perhaps most pertinent. This implies that an inclusive classroom means that whoever walks through the door at the beginning of a class session will be given every opportunity to feel involved in any learning activities that occur once the lesson starts. The next question that faces us is how this looks in practical terms, which will be covered in the next section.

## Focusing on Learners

### Learning Differences

The challenge that any teacher faces with in a classroom environment is the potential differences in students' learning styles. The impact of this will vary depending on a range of factors: from the organisation that is supporting the teacher to the structure and academic 'streaming' of the class they are teaching. This can mean that the instructor may possess a full and details dossier on each and every student attending

their class, or they may, conversely, have absolutely no information on who they are teaching until the class starts. The students may be carefully 'streamed' so their levels and competence are relatively close to their classmates, and they may be used to a similar learning style. On the other hand, there could be a wide spectrum of language competency among the learners, and they could well come from a wide variety of different learning backgrounds and experiences. What is clear, if we assume that language teaching is based on communication and interaction in the classroom, learning differences and how they are handled are crucial in the teaching/learning process. Bearing this in mind, let us look at the concepts behind learning differences in learners and see how they fit into constructing an inclusive learning environment.

In their review of learning differences, Barger et al. (1994) refer to Carl Jung. Jung identified sets of psychological processes: attitude (orientation), perception, judgement (decision making) and adaptation. Attitude is seen as a spectrum, with individuals who are more oriented to people and events found in the real world and are outgoing with a preference for doing activities with other people (seen as extroversion) at one end. At the other end, there are those who are oriented towards their inner thoughts and values and prefer careful consideration and even keeping their ideas to themselves (introversion). Perception is categorised into sensation, which refers to those learners who are excellent observers and pay attention to what is real in their surroundings and experiences. Facts have a lot of significance to this type. Across from this is intuition. This type of perception refers to learners who tend to focus on the symbolic meanings and possibilities that they see in their surroundings. This kind of perception is heavily linked to greater levels of imagination and working with hunches.

Decision making is also separated into two categories: thinking and feeling. The former refers to a more logical, serious and perhaps impersonal approach to decision making. The latter, as the name suggests, means reaching decisions with an emphasis on values, compassion and care for human welfare. Maintaining harmony and collegial relationships is a priority for this type. Adaptation is separated into judgement and perception. These influence how everyday tasks are carried out. The former underpins a preference for organised scheduling and, importantly for a teacher, a need for regulation in how their work is evaluated. Perception refers to learners who value novelty and spontaneity.

These categories are of value to a teacher, as they provide a guideline to how students react to various situations and tasks. Of course, caution must be exercised with any concept that involves grouping people into categories. It is also worth noting that educational background and prior experience will play a significant part in dictating how a learner reacts, and an individual who would perhaps have a leaning towards perception may be far more comfortable in an environment tailored towards judgement due to their prior schooling. The teacher is therefore faced with the decision of whether to adhere to a style that fits a student's expectations of what education should look like, or attempt to introduce them to a style that, once they become used to it, they could benefit from even more.

Another conceptual framework of interest in this area is that of learner resilience/non resilience (Padron et al., 1999). Resilience can be defined as the 'personal qualities that enable one to thrive in the face of adversity' (Connor & Davidson, 2003: 76). The Resiliency Model introduces the dynamic process in which one acquires the intrapersonal qualities that underpin adaptive responses towards stress and adversity (Richardson, 2002). It suggests that the state of well-being within individuals can be interrupted by adversity (Richardson, 2002). While the interruption of this balance could potentially lead to maladjustments, it also allows individuals to acquire new coping skills by engaging in a cognitive reintegration/recovery process (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Richardson, 2002). Consequently, resilience can be strengthened over time depending on a person's successfully adapting to adversity (Richardson, 2002). That is, highly resilient individuals are those who have shown the ability to overcome stressful conditions.

These concepts are of particular interest in the discussion about inclusivity in the classroom. A teacher must, as much as possible, create a learning environment that optimises the learning styles of their learners'. It is, however, important not to mistake inclusivity for simple 'comfort' in the classroom. There is benefit from ensuring that learners are pushed to outside their 'comfort zone' and this will mean 'testing' learners' resilience as the teacher looks to challenge them. This means that as a class session progresses, learners are taken through a cycle of activities that will leave them feeling less 'included' and perhaps with some anxiety at certain times as they are introduced to some concepts that are at the edge, or even beyond, the comfort zone of their

competency, but they then feel 'included' and more comfortable as they proceed with the task and complete it successfully, hopefully with a greater sense of resilience.

It is clear that the teacher must initiate this process in their class sessions where the learners are challenged and therefore maintain an interest in the contents of their class. It must then be ensured that the learner is returned to a feeling of satisfaction and a low level of anxiety. A feeling of being 'included' is integral to achieving this.

We can now take a closer look at how these concepts fit into 'ideal' language teaching.

## An Active Classroom: Active Learning

Active learning is any approach to instruction in which all students are asked to engage in the learning process. Active learning stands in contrast to 'traditional' modes of instruction in which students are passive recipients of knowledge from an expert. Active learning can take many forms and be executed in any discipline. Commonly, students will engage in small or large activities centred around writing, talking, problem solving or reflecting (University of Minnesota, 2023).

Interaction, participation and collaboration are thought to be important factors for supporting successful second or foreign language learning. The use of interactive groups (IGs) is regarded as helpful in creating the conditions in which interaction, participation and collaboration are increased to create effective dialogic learning. (Zubiri-Esnaola et al., 2020).

## Physical Movement

If we work on the premise that 'movement is essential for learning', we can take it that the language instructor should weave movement into their classroom strategy. Interestingly, a review of the literature on the topic of movement within the classroom often brings with it a focus on children's education (Blakemore, 2013). However, though the need to 'burn off energy' may apply more to children, there is a strong case for keeping language learners of any age focused in the classroom by involving movement in the learning process (Stevens-Smith, 2004).

The efficacy of physical movement in improving learning capacity is most certainly not restricted to school-age learners.

To tie in the points raised in the last three sections, we have seen that organising an inclusive classroom entails considering the often disparate learning styles that your learners favour. We have seen that the inclusion of group work is seen as a generally positive element in learning. We have also seen that an active classroom is highly beneficial. The conclusion could be here, then, that a learning environment that includes a variety of learning styles, small group work, full-class activities, independent-study activities, is probably most likely to provide at least some elements that match the learning styles of all the learners in a class group. It can therefore be presumed that switching between these various styles of learning will involve higher levels of movement in the classroom as students are required to switch, both physically and mentally, between these activities

Perhaps, we now have the building blocks to achieve an inclusive learning environment for learning language. This brings me to the situation in my own teaching that inspired me to put this paper together, which I will elucidate in the next section,

**Learning Difficulties**

It may well be amiss of me to have reached this far in a discussion on inclusivity without having already mentioned learning difficulties as they are often viewed as absolutely central to any discussion on this subject (Schuelka et al., 2019).

My language lessons, which are predominantly with undergraduate students here in Japan but, in the past, have included adult classes and postgraduate students, very much follow this style, with students sharing answers on the board, learners working in large group activities mixed with small group or individual study, and often having the learners leave their seats and relocating within the classroom to start a new activity. Granted, there are some students who flourish in this environment and others who simply 'get by', but the thinking is that in a large group of learners, you are able to maximise the learners' levels of comfort. The extra layer to this, however, is the consideration that must be given to learning difficulties.

The situation that threw this firmly into focus for me was when, for the first time after some twenty years of language teaching, there were three learners in my class groups who were wheelchair users. This provided an immediate challenge in maintaining a truly active classroom. The very first activity that I often use as a 'warm up' in a class session is asking 'what did you do at the weekend?' The issue I have

found with this is when I ask students to report their partners' replies back to me, there are no volunteers. To avoid having to 'pick on' students to answer, I simply have the learners stand up. They then raise their hands and report their partner's answer and can sit down on completing this. I have found this 'twist' in this activity works effectively as it gives learners the motivation to speak up (i.e. once they do, they can sit down and relax). It also introduces an element of movement that breaks up the potential monotony of being 'stuck' in their seats for 90 minutes.

Having wheelchair users attending my class, I found myself feeling a little 'stuck' as asking the class to stand up would immediately place focus on those learners who were unable to do so due to their physical situation. Of course, this was not disastrous as I was able to revert to a more 'traditional' way of completing this particular activity. It is, however, clear to see the challenge that arises when learners with some physical 'impairment' are introduced into the learning group, and it represents a microcosm of the considerations that need to be put in place when learning difficulties exist within a class group. Before we look at this in greater depth, it is important to outline some clear definitions of key terms in this discussion.

**Learning Disabilities vs Learning Difficulties**

A learning disability is different from a learning difficulty as a learning difficulty does not affect general intellect. This difference is most definitely pertinent for educational institutions, but for the language teacher within the classroom environment, they can probably be treated under the same 'umbrella' and then handled in each individual case. There are many different types of learning difficulty, some of the more well-known are dyslexia, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyspraxia and dyscalculia. A person can have one, or a combination (mencap, 2021).

The example of the wheelchair users mentioned earlier would, of course, come within the scope of learning disability as these learners have all passed the requisite exams to enter a standard university course. The fact that a student has met the entry requirements does not mean that they may not have a learning difficulty, of course, but the main cause for any barriers to them fully participating in a class will be purely practical and could be grouped with, conceptually at least, other less pressing issues such as a student whose vision is not perfect being unable to read what is written on a

whiteboard. The teacher must be prepared to show flexibility in their approach in dealing with these issues.

**The Role of the Institution**

Anyone with experience working in education will be aware that support networks for teachers when it comes to interacting with learners vary greatly depending on the individual institution. The example situation I am discussing here involves an institution that does not provide substantial information on individual learners. There can be a tendency for a teacher to become agitated when their employer does not have a network of support in place. However, it is probably advisable to take a more positive approach to potentially improving situations heading into the future.

It is important to remember that social and therefore educational conditions are ever-changing. The case of university students in Japan is that up until the recent past, young people with physical disabilities were perhaps not encouraged to attend university. This situation is now changing in Japan, as various legislation has been developed in conjunction with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which came into force on February 17, 2014. With respect to institutions of higher education, the Act on the Elimination of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities – which took effect in April 2016 – created a legal prohibition against discriminatory treatment of people with disabilities, including students. The Act also prohibits non-provision of reasonable accommodations (*National Survey of Supports for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education Settings in Japan (Provisional Translation)*, n.d.).

It is highly possible that a teacher may be at the forefront of such changes and may then be required to act as a form of conduit between the learners' experiences in the classroom and the institution that provides the education.

The teacher must take full responsibility for how 'included' learners are in their class. This involves making a judgement call on how much they can control and manage themselves and how much responsibility should be pushed back onto the educational institution.

## An Active Classroom That is Truly Inclusive

The management of a truly inclusive classroom is clearly a complex process. However, hopefully the fundamentals that underpin it are relatively clear. One key point here is teacher–student communication.

## Communication

A quote that I found from research into positive teacher–student communication really stood out here.

> *'One reason for that is students tend to be more motivated to learn and be engaged in the classroom when their teacher likes and cares about them. Positive teacher–student relationships change student behavior, and in this study, we found building those positive relationships actually leads to better teaching, too. It changes teacher behaviour'* (Positive Teacher–Student Relationships Lead to Better Teaching – College of Education & Human Development, 2022).

The example mentioned actually provides a glimpse at a possibly salient approach for dealing situations of learning difficulty/disability in the classroom. It may be an obvious point, but a focus needs to be on student individuality. The wheelchair using learners that joined my classes had distinctly varying learning styles. I was able to find this out by communicating with them directly. During one activity where learners move to the white board to share their answers to a particular task, I inquired whether they wanted to participate. There may be an argument for designing activities that all members can join completely freely, but unless you have a learning space that is customised for all learning difficulties and disabilities, there will have to be some flexibility. The choice has to be made whether you curtail some of the movement in your class for the majority of the students, just so a small percentage do not feel 'left out'. The thinking behind asking these learners was to let them know that they were in the teacher's thinking. If they had shown a willingness to join the activity, it would be possible to accommodate them. The respective responses of the learners in question were interesting as one of them was keen to actively join in, while another was content with staying as an observer. Of course, comprehensive research into learners' feelings about inclusion in various class activities would shed further light on this.

## Conclusion

As we close this discussion on the inclusive classroom, perhaps we can frame the concept as being the maximisation of learners having a feeling of 'belonging' in the classroom. In order to do this, the learner's perspective must be taken into consideration. This should include the examination of learning differences, including learning disabilities that lead to learning difficulties.

We have also seen that the pursuit of an 'inclusive' classroom should not be at the expense of maintaining an active and challenging learning environment. Learner comfort within the learning/study teaching process must not bring with it boredom and inertia. The teacher needs to remember that taking learners to the edge (and beyond) of their competency requires some 'stress' for the learners. The real challenge is preparing learners to cope with such situations.

We have also seen that the maintenance of an inclusive learning environment requires reacting to changes in the wider educational context. Institutional change, from governmental level through to individual educational institutions will impact the teacher. Inclusivity means within the wider system as well as in the classroom. It is highly possible that the teacher must act as a conduit between the learners and the institution within which they are studying as effects of wider changes impact on the classroom environment. This involves ensuring that feedback is channelled back to the managing body of the institution so can become fully responsive to learner needs that cannot be met by the teacher alone.

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