

Inclusive activities for young learners

I teach English as a foreign language to young learners in a state primary school in Serbia. It is often the case in state schools that the differences in students' abilities are huge, they range from those whose level of English is way above the expected to those who struggle with reading and writing in their own language. In such mixed ability classes, sometimes with more than 25 students each, it is difficult for teachers to cater for the needs of all students and follow the school curriculum at the same time.

It is usually suggested for students with learning difficulties to be given different, easier tasks to do which often makes them feel excluded. Group work and project work seem to be the best solution, but sometimes fast learners take over and slower learners just sit back and let others do the work. In some cases they divide tasks between themselves and they just sit in groups but all the work is done individually. Sometimes letting students choose the team or group members themselves, creates a difficult situation as usually the slowest and the weakest students are left out.

The activities of this project are created in order to make sure that all the students are actively participating and most importantly, learning. The variety of activities and careful assigning of roles seems to be crucial for involving all the students in the learning process.

This mini project was done with a class of 26 second grade students who just had started learning how to read and write in English. Most of the students had average or above average abilities. Two students had characteristics of ADHD and there were four very slow learners, who were struggling to keep up with the rest of the class in all the subjects, not only English.

The topic of the module was "Places in town" and the grammar unit was "Regular plural of nouns and the use of *there is / there are*".

In some stages of the project, the students were divided into two teams, some activities were done individually and in some stages they were divided into four groups. In that case, the high achievers and the students with learning difficulties were distributed evenly and each student had their role in the group.

Activity 1. Vocabulary introduction through a picture story

Students are introduced to the new vocabulary through a picture story. For this activity also a song or a chant can be used. Students are already familiar with most of the vocabulary, as they had it in the first grade and they just build upon their previous knowledge now, adding words in the written form.

Activity 2. A matching game

The introduction is followed by a short activity "*Match the words to the pictures*". In this activity picture cards and word cards are on the board and students are called out to go to the board and match the words to the pictures. There should be enough cards for each student to have a chance to do the exercise at least once. If not, cards can be reordered several times.

I use simple flashcards that I get from the publisher but different pictures can be downloaded from the Internet. The word cards are simply printed on a home printer and I glue them to the cardboard to last longer.

Slower learners are not excluded from the exercise but they are called out to do the activity towards the end of the game, when others have reordered the cards once or twice before or they are called for easier words like park, supermarket or pet shop which are pronounced the same in Serbian so there is less chance to make a mistake.

Activity 3. Draw and write

After the game, students draw pictures and write the words in their notebooks. Students with learning difficulties can have cards with words already written on them and they can glue them in the notebook under the pictures.

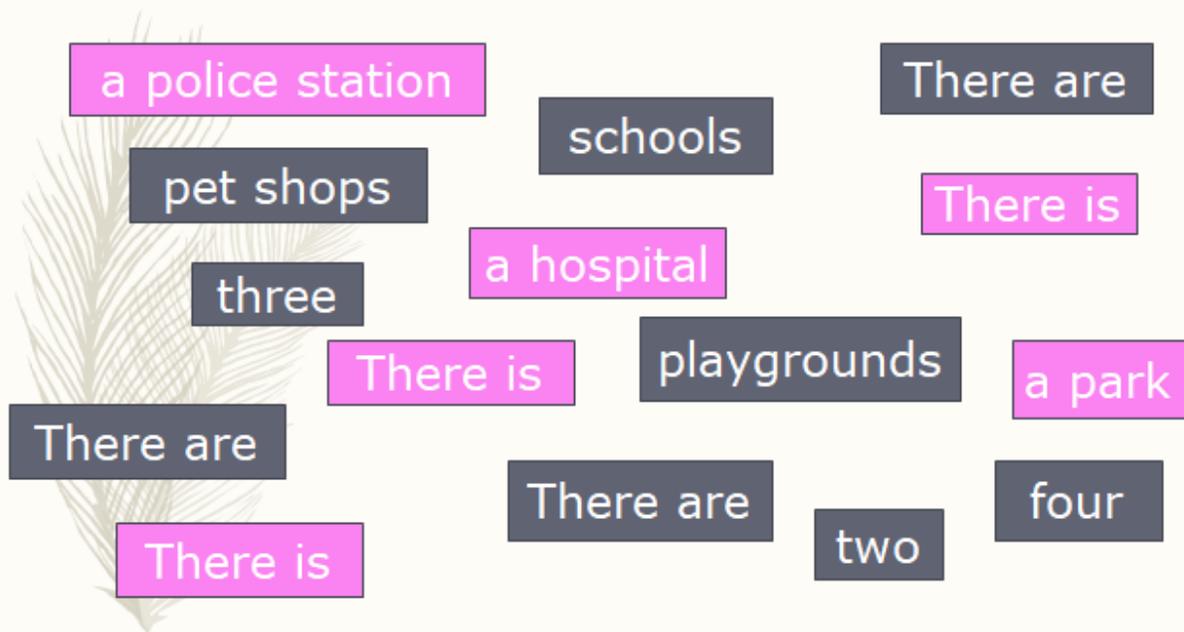
Activity 4. Fly swatter game for vocabulary practice

There are different versions of this game - only words, only pictures or words and pictures. In this case, the picture cards and word cards are put on the board. There are two teams. Two students, one from each team, have fly swatters and when the teacher says the word they have to "catch" it with a fly swatter. If they catch a picture card they get one point, if they catch a word card their team gets two points. Then, each of them assigns the next person from their group to compete. The rule is that nobody can go twice before all of them have tried at least once which prevents weaker students from being excluded from the game. As they are usually assigned towards

the end of the game, the words have already been called out several times. The weakest students sometimes can be assigned to be in charge of taking notes on points on the board which makes them feel in charge of the game.

Activity 5. Sentence matching

In the following stage the students are introduced to a grammar unit and it is practiced in groups through a matching activity (*there is a + a singular noun or there are + a plural noun*). In the first stage the cards are in different colours. In this case all singulars are pink and plurals are blue to help them make sentences. Also, as additional help the words which come in front of the sentence are written in capital letters.

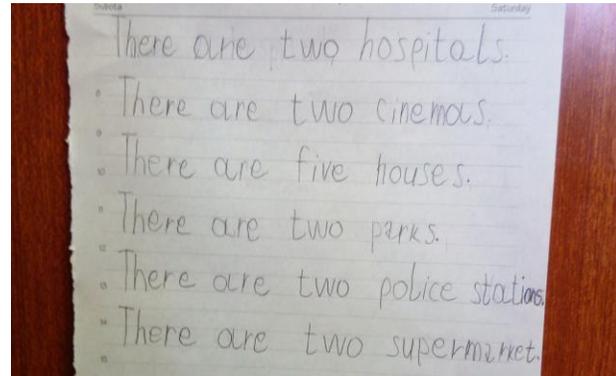
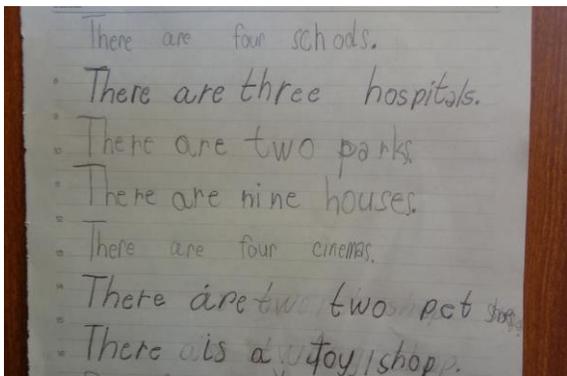


In the next stage all the cards are in the same colour. The task is to make sentences and to glue or copy them into their notebooks.

This activity can also be differentiated - cards in different colours with or without capital letters, and cards in the same colour with or without capital letters.

Activity 7. Running dictation

The final stage of the project is Running dictation used for vocabulary and grammar practice. Each group has a task to count the buildings on one of the posters and to write sentences using *There is* and *There are*. In this stage, the runners are the students with learning difficulties and they are in charge of going to the poster, counting the objects and going back to report to the group. This is a task they are able to do and in that way contribute to the group work. Other students in the group are "writers", in charge of writing and some are "checkers" in charge of checking if the sentences were correctly spelled and grammatically correct.



Conclusion

The good thing about this project is that the students with learning difficulties, whether it was hyperactivity or a cognitive deficit had their roles in each of the stages of the project which made them feel they were equally involved in all the activities. Even though their roles did not include using grammar, reading or writing they contributed to the final product.

As a result of mixed grouping during this project all the groups had equally good posters and sentences, and all the students were involved in the learning process according to their abilities.