

# Higher French and Music for a candidate with a hearing difficulty

## Course, candidate and challenges

Tom has a permanent, moderate, bi-lateral sensorineural hearing loss for which he wears a hearing aid in his right ear. He is unable to wear a hearing aid in his left ear resulting in no useful hearing in that ear. Tom has particular difficulty in accessing sounds with lower frequencies and also suffers from tinnitus.

In class, Tom has the use of a radio aid which allows him to hear the teacher's voice through a transmitter but does not enable him to hear the other pupils' contributions. He chooses when he will use the radio aid depending on the loudness of the teacher's voice, the acoustics in the room, level of background noise and the nature of the lesson. To supplement what he hears, Tom relies on lip reading, facial expression and body language.

Since nursery Tom has received regular input from a Hearing Support teacher but, in the last few years, as Tom has been making excellent progress, this has been reduced to a monthly 'check and a chat'. Tom receives no other additional support.

Throughout Tom's schooling, his teachers have received deaf-awareness training at the beginning of the session to ensure that they understand the challenges which face a pupil with a hearing impairment in a mainstream class. In recent years Tom has taken a leading role in delivering these sessions himself.

Having passed eight Standard Grades without any assessment arrangements in place, Tom opted to take five Highers: English, History, RMPS, French and Music. It was generally accepted that Tom should take five Highers on the back of a good set of Standard Grade results. As far as Tom was concerned, the choice of Highers was simple: he chose them because he enjoyed the subjects even though Higher French and Music contain Listening Elements which would prove challenging for him.

## How Tom accessed the Courses in class

Halfway through the Music Course Tom realised that, during Listening exercises, he was missing bits:

'I always had trouble hearing bass notes. Although I could hear something, I struggled to hear the difference between notes. They all just sounded the same — dull thuds. It didn't seem to matter so much in Standard Grade but what I was asked to do at Higher was much more complex.'

Through observation and discussion with Tom, the Music teacher concluded that Tom heard something, but that it was different to what the others in the room heard. Tom spent a number of sessions listening to music with his Music teacher to establish what he was missing. As his understanding of musical concepts developed, Tom learned to predict what was likely to happen with the bass line. His Music teacher concluded that 'Tom's ability to compensate for what he is not hearing is remarkable.'

The Composing and Performing Elements of the Course posed no problems for Tom. He used computer software for composition which allowed him to see on the computer screen what he wanted to happen. His choice of instruments for the Performing Element was surprising: the 'cello and bass guitar which you would expect to have been particularly challenging for Tom as both these instruments occupy the lower frequencies. However, it may be that as bass sounds are the most powerful, with appropriate amplification they were the most accessible.

For French, Tom was in a class of 24. The classroom was enclosed and carpeted, a fairly typical secondary school listening environment. Normally, Tom sat to the left at the front of the class choosing not to use his radio aid because he felt he could hear his teacher's voice clearly. If, at any time, he felt he was struggling to hear, he would let the teacher know. During the Standard Grade Course, Tom had required no alternative arrangements for Listening. In retrospect, he felt that because of the structure (question and answer with a pause after each), he had time to process the information and predict from the context what was likely to appear. Listening at Higher level required Tom to listen to a continuous conversation which he immediately found more challenging.

Tom tried a number of options to help him access Listening activities:

- ◆ using headphones which would have given him better direct access to the CD, but they interfered with his use of his hearing aid
- ◆ using an audio cable to connect the CD player to his radio aid, allowing him to access the Listening exercise through his hearing aids, but this did not work for him
- ◆ laying his radio aid beside the CD player to boost its sound

But Tom's preferred option was simply to move to a separate room so that he was able to concentrate fully on listening to the CD.

## **How Tom was assessed**

From the beginning of the session, Tom's teachers had spoken with him about the Listening assessments and what they could put in place to support him. For the Listening sections of his prelim exams he had separate accommodation and extra time added on to the end of the assessment. This was in line with the way he had been working in class. But, in both Music and French, Tom's marks for the Listening components were substantially lower than for the other components in the exams.

Everyone acknowledged that Tom was both hardworking and able, his knowledge and understanding of the syllabus was never in question. It was also agreed that although the best possible listening environment was being provided, Tom was still considerably underachieving.

Tom and his Music teacher explored a number of different arrangements. They tried repeating the music and varying the sound controls until they concluded that the best arrangement was to pause the music for 20 seconds after each musical extract. This finally provided the arrangement which allowed Tom the time to process what he had heard.

In French, the Listening assessment consisted of a conversation between two native French speakers followed by a number of questions which the pupils heard twice with a pause of two minutes in between.

The Hearing Support teacher suggested using a live speaker to present the Listening assessment. In this way Tom would be able to supplement what he heard with what he saw by lip reading, in facial expression and body language. SQA Arrangements stipulate that such a presenter should be a native speaker so the school identified a native French speaker and trialled an assessment with Tom.

Tom watched the live speaker and then took notes using the extra time at the end. He was thus relying heavily on memory to see him through, as opposed to his hearing classmates who were able to listen and take notes at the same time. Tom's score did not improve.

Another possibility was to use the CD with pauses throughout the delivery rather than extra time at the end. However while this arrangement was appropriate in Standard Grade where the Listening assessment was structured as question and answer, at Higher the pauses interrupted the flow of conversation. It was impossible to achieve a clean break as they could not be sure that Tom was not missing part of the conversation. Instead they tried playing the complete transcript of the conversation three times, pausing at the end of the conversation each time to allow time for Tom to process what he heard and to take notes. Finally, through considerable trial and discussion, they had arrived at a procedure which seemed to allow a reasonable reflection of Tom's ability. The French teacher admitted that there was an element of trial and error:

‘There isn't a right answer that'll work for everyone — you just have to work away at it.’

Thus, in both Music and French it had been important to address Tom's two needs: the need to provide the optimum listening experience and the need to allow him the time necessary to process the information to which he was listening.

## How successful was the delivery of the Courses?

Even before Tom received his results, 'A's in both Music and French, he was clear that both Courses had been positive experiences. He appreciates the time and effort put in by his teachers to ensure that his final grade reflected what they felt was his true ability. He also appreciates that he has benefited from being fully involved throughout the process:

'It was brilliant that we had different trial runs. It certainly helped being involved in the dialogue.'

Tom has a level of disability which could prove a barrier to future success unless it is carefully managed and he is clear in his own mind that the responsibility of managing it must be his. This experience is already proving invaluable in discussions with Disability Officers regarding the support that can be put in place for him at university.

## Advice

It would have been easy to try to dissuade Tom from taking Higher French and Music. If he was looking for a good set of grades it would make sense that he played to his strengths, which would not include listening. Once Tom had decided to go ahead with these Courses it would have been even easier to accept that Tom was going to perform at a lower level in his Listening because he has a hearing impairment. But Tom's teachers were open-minded and prepared to work with him.

Teachers would normally plan to put assessment arrangements in place at the earliest opportunity but sometimes the process evolves as the Course goes on. Looking back, Tom had been coping well considering his hearing impairment, a view shared by Tom himself. Once the dialogue began, including Tom, the PT for Support for Learning, the Hearing Support Teacher and SQA, things moved very quickly. In particular, the Music teacher found the support offered by SQA empowering:

'The credibility it gave to me that I wasn't just some whingeing teacher trying to get their pupil through, no matter what. I was a professional doing my job.'

The PT Support for Learning found her discussions with SQA most productive, she now knows that she can refine how the extra time is used when it is needed and be much more sensitive to the pupil's needs.

While it is necessary to involve the young person in the dialogue, it is not always something they feel comfortable with. To engage in such a dialogue with an articulate and reflective pupil like Tom is rewarding, though time-consuming!

Ultimately, subject teachers and even class teachers in primary schools need to be addressing this issue at the earliest possible stage.

It is appropriate that Tom should have the final word:

'If I hadn't had that help I wouldn't have got those marks. The extra time gave me the extra few minutes to think things over. Everyone was brilliant.'