

Educating by Example: Including Teachers with Disabilities

Working with English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers with disabilities is easier than you think. By keeping an ongoing conversation about the individual's progress and requirements, you will ensure a successful experience for all.

This is best illustrated through the experience of the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE), which accommodated Erinn Snoeyink, first in a semester abroad program in Seville, Spain, and then on their Teach in Spain Program in Toledo. Erinn, who is blind, wanted the opportunity to get to know Spain better after her first experience, and CIEE was more than happy to oblige.

As soon as Erinn was accepted to the program, CIEE staff initiated a conversation regarding her accommodation needs that started before departure and continued throughout the program. They decided that Toledo would be a good location for the assignment. It is a small city with 80,000 inhabitants, and a short 23 minute train ride from the CIEE Center in Madrid.

According to Morgan Reiss, the Director of Student Services with CIEE Seville who worked with Erinn during her study abroad: Smaller cities offer certain advantages. Most of the roads are newer, life is a bit slower, and communities are very people oriented.

They also found that Erinn's skill set was probably not going to allow her to negotiate her surroundings alone. Toledo was full of cobblestone streets, which did not follow any pattern, and the sidewalks were only

separated from the street with posts set just a couple yards apart from one another. Traffic patterns meant that it would likely be impossible for her to cross the street independently.

CIEE located a personal assistant through trusted sources to help accompany Erinn between her work and her home stay, as well as to help her with any errands in Madrid. They shared this cost with Erinn.

Alana Meek, CIEE Teach in Spain Program Coordinator, reflects that these early conversations were helpful for them to get a sense of the arrangements that would not only work best for Erinn's disability, but also for her personality.

Despite the success, things did not always go off without a hitch, says Morgan.

"I would love to say that our programs were all designed with universal design, but the truth is that a lot of times there are logistical issues or architectural things or just even the city itself."

And they did experience certain setbacks during her program. The first assignment that she received was at an elementary school with young children. Erinn reflects that teachers and staff did not appear to believe in her abilities, and she had limited opportunities to organize and carry out lessons with the students. Much of the coursework was also centered around a single textbook, which turned out to be difficult to obtain.

Alana took a broad view on the issues that arose.



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“Sometimes it is not known how things will work out until the moment. Therefore, flexibility, thinking creatively, and keeping communication open are essential by all involved.”

Things improved after Erinn moved to a high school. The teacher and students would volunteer to write things on the board as needed and colleagues were willing to email handouts so she could access them.

Thanks to her CIEE experience, Erinn has found a new calling, she says.

“It’s wonderful to see someone not understand something and then find a way to break through that barrier and then they catch on.”



Learn more about Erinn’s experience teaching and studying in Spain from her Ripple Effects podcast episode:

miusa.org/resource/podcast/erinn



Fast Fact: In celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, CIEE and Mobility International USA (MIUSA) partnered to provide 27 scholarships to U.S. college students with disabilities to study abroad.