

The Balancing Act

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Working with students that have motor deficits can be complicated in many different ways. Most of us take for granted the ability to move from one place to another without even having to think about it. We can shift our weight from one foot to the other without even being aware that we are doing this. We can reach for a cup of coffee, talk on the phone and tap our foot in time to a song on the radio without ever being fully aware that we are doing all these things. Students with motor deficits have a very different task in front of them whenever they have to move. Often, these students have to focus very hard on the actual motor task of basic things such as keeping their balance, reaching out to touch something, or moving the mouse to a computer. These activities are not automatic and when the student is focusing on these basic tasks, there may not be much attention left for other things such as following a conversation or thinking about the cognitive task at hand (i.e. math facts).

When thinking about the tasks we are asking students with motor deficits to do we have to remember to keep in mind the idea of cognitive and motor balance. The basic tenets of this idea are illustrated in the two diagrams below.



Fig. 1 When the cognitive load is high the motor load should be low and vice versa.

With this in mind, it becomes even more important that we carefully choose the tasks and the methods of doing those tasks based on careful consideration of the purpose of the task. Using a tool such as the SETT framework (see Fig.2) can be invaluable in providing a framework to help determine what the specific challenges are and how best to address them for each task a student is expected to perform.) More information regarding this process can be found at www.atto.buffalo.edu/registered/ATBasics/Foundation/Assessment/sett