Language Learning Disabilities: The Ultimate Foreign Language Challenge

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Abstract: In today’s world where great value is placed on global understanding, the acquisition of languages is essential. Academics would agree that the study of other languages provides students access to the cultural and intellectual heritage of cultures other than their own. Additionally, such study gives new and different perspectives on the structure and complexity of English. For the majority of students, the fulfillment of the college foreign language requirement is not problematic. But what happens to the individuals who have difficulty fulfilling the requirement? This article describes the special difficulties university students with dyslexia and other language learning difficulties have in satisfying the foreign language requirement. The article also provides a checklist of warning signs that identify students who are at risk for failure in foreign language classes, academic options to help students with language learning difficulties, and recommendations for alternative teaching methodologies for students who do not have the ability to learn a foreign language through traditional teaching methods.

Introduction
A number of students experience special difficulties in satisfying the college foreign language requirement. The 10- to 15-credit requirement established by most colleges and universities is designed to build on or complement previous language study at the high school level and to ensure that students achieve meaningful proficiency in the target language. At some institutions, students may be exempt from the foreign language requirement either because they have exceeded the placement score range designated by the institution or because they have a documented learning disability which may preclude them from successfully completing this requirement without extraordinary effort. Fulfilling the language requirement is not a problem for the majority of students.

Unfortunately, at every institution with this requirement, there are students for whom this requirement is not waived and who simply cannot succeed despite steadfast efforts to turn in their homework on time, seek out their instructors for extra help, attend the language lab faithfully, hire tutors, and spend an inordinate number of hours studying. These are students with undocumented language learning difficulties. In theory, their test scores should be the highest, but in reality, they are the lowest. Instructors watch the motivation and the morale of these hard-working students decline rapidly until the day they drop the course. Some never reenroll in the language class; some reappear the following semester only to subject themselves to more frustration, humiliation, and failure. Others attempt another foreign language, and a few—who are particularly tenacious—attempt a third language.

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What can foreign language instructors do for these persistent students who have hit the proverbial brick wall in their academic programs? What is the nature of these special learning difficulties that often go unnoticed until students enroll in foreign language classes? What alternatives or instructional strategies should we consider when teaching them? This article addresses these issues and provides guidelines for assisting students for whom successfully completing a foreign language requirement is an extremely difficult achievement.

**Perspectives on Learning Disabilities and Foreign Language Learning**

Who are these students? They are students who, while often bright and sometimes gifted, have encountered some difficulties in learning the spoken and/or written code of their native language. Their language learning difficulties are often inherited (Flax et al., 2003) and are often compensated for because these students are highly motivated, work much harder than their peers, and have supportive families who typically provide them with tutors and/or other excellent educational opportunities (Shaywitz, 2003). Some of these students have compensated for their language weaknesses so effectively that they were never tested for a disability or placed in special academic classes. If these students have a general diagnosis it is typically a learning disability. If they have a more specific diagnosis, it is typically dyslexia. A learning disability is a neurological disorder that often runs in families and affects one’s learning in one or more areas. Most individuals with learning disabilities have difficulty with some aspect of language learning (Lyon, 1994). Dyslexia, the most common learning disability, is a specific type of reading disability that appears to result from difficulty in forming adequate phonological representations of the sounds of one’s language (Brady & Shankweiler, 1991; Ramus et al., 2003; Snowling, 1981; Vellutino, 1979). In persons who have dyslexia, many phonologically based skills can be affected such as manipulating sound or sound units in spoken language tasks (e.g., Pig Latin), transforming print into sounds (e.g., sounding out words), recognizing printed words automatically, repeating unfamiliar sound sequences, retrieving sounds from memory to produce words, and transforming sounds into letters (e.g., spelling words). Dyslexia is most commonly believed to be the result of a disruption in phonological processing that affects one’s ability to manipulate and remember sound and letter sequences. It does not affect one’s reasoning ability and individuals have normal listening comprehension skills. Because it appears to be a rather circumscribed learning disability for which many people can compensate quite well, we often find that persons with dyslexia attend college and enroll in foreign language classes (Ganschow & Sparks, 1986; Ganschow, Sparks, & Javorsky, 1998; Sparks & Ganschow, 1991).

Over the last two decades, several studies have documented the reading and spelling difficulties that persist in college students who have dyslexia (Bruck, 1990; Bender, Pollatsek, & Scarpati, 1991; Hanley, 1997; Snowling, Nation, Moxham, Gallagher, & Frith, 1997; Wilson & Lesaux, 2001), and a small group of researchers has specified the nature of foreign language learning in students who have learning disabilities (Ganschow & Sparks, 1986; Ganschow et al., 1998; Sparks & Ganschow, 1991; Sparks et al., 1997; Sparks, Ganschow, & Pohlman, 1989; Sparks, Philips, & Javorsky, 2002).

In addition to dyslexia, a smaller group of learning disabled students in foreign language classes experiences more pervasive language deficits than are observed in students with dyslexia. These students have greater difficulty with all aspects of learning a foreign language because their learning deficits are not specific to phonological processing problems alone. Instead, their difficulties are more conceptual in nature and are often most apparent in depressed comprehension of their own native languages (Nation, Adams, Bowyer-Crane, & Snowling, 1999).

Unfortunately, foreign language teachers, who often are the first instructors to observe the students’ learning difficulties, have not participated in advancing our understanding of the challenges involved in assisting students with learning disabilities who take foreign language classes. An enormous void exists in this area particularly with respect to the development of alternative methodologies for facilitating the success of students with learning disabilities in learning an L2. Hence, the research regarding alternative methods for teaching foreign languages to students with learning disabilities is limited in depth and narrow in scope (Sparks & Ganschow, 1991).

The first published study making a connection between foreign language difficulties and learning disabilities appeared in 1971 in a chapter by Kenneth Dinklage titled “Emotional Problems of the Student.” Dinklage, a clinical psychologist at Harvard University Health Services, documented his observation that students dropped out of their degree programs because they were unable to satisfy Harvard’s foreign language requirement. Dinklage described three groups of students who were otherwise bright, gifted, and highly motivated, but who remained unsuccessful in the foreign language classroom. He reported that these students were not helped by merely improving study habits or by adjusting to postsecondary academic demands.

The first group of students demonstrated problems with written language that were most apparent in the student’s reading aloud, pronunciation of sounds, and spelling. Dinklage (1971) noted that the students’ spelling errors were not random, but rather represented more systematic patterns such as reversals or omissions of letters and letter sequences (e.g., ei vs. ie). These students often made gross reversal errors when reading aloud, reversing word sequences, reading a word backwards (such as was...
for saw), or misperceiving letters in a mirror-image way (b for d, p for q, etc.). Dinklage and colleagues referred to several terms popular in the 1970s to describe these language-based problems and cited a British study by Critchley (1964), who called this set of symptoms “developmental dyslexia.” However, the few American scholars who were familiar with Critchley at that time were hesitant to adopt the term dyslexia because it is a medically based classification that suggests a neurological processing deficit. The terms specific reading disability or specific language disability became standard ways of classifying this learning disability (Dinklage, 1971).

From the 1920s through the 1940s, Dr. Samuel Torrey Orton, a physician interested in the neurological basis of learning disabilities, attempted to explain the nature of language learning deficits observed in children that precluded them from reading and writing at levels commensurate with their intellectual abilities and educational opportunities. Orton described this set of symptoms as strephosymbolia (taken from the Greek strephos meaning “to twist” and symbolos meaning “symbols”). He developed a multisensory approach to reading and spelling that has been refined and elaborated upon by many researchers over the past five decades (Baddeley, 1986; Brady, 1986; Liberman, Mann, Shankweiler, & Werfelman, 1982; Torgesen, Wagner, & Rashotte, 1994). The term strephosymbolia was used after World War II and Dinklage (1971) adopted this in lieu of the term dyslexia.

The second group of students described by Dinklage (1971) had problems with “auditory discrimination.” These students were “handicapped in telling the differences between similar but different sounds” (p. 195). Earlier in the 20th century, while the grammar translation method of foreign language learning was in vogue, these students had no special difficulties. However, as reported by Dinklage, when this methodology was later replaced by the audiolingual approach, these same kind of students could not even grasp the basic fundamentals of the language. The difficulties encountered by these students appear to be similar to the auditory processing deficits described in Tallal’s studies of children with specific language impairment. Tallal et al. (1996) posited that one primary cause of language disorders in many children was an inability to process speech at the rapid rate at which it is presented in normal conversation. She and colleagues described how modifying the speech signal acoustically by slowing down its rate and increasing its intensity could enhance the student’s performance. Intervention procedures that acoustically modify the speech signal and systematically progress to normal rates and intensities have been shown to be beneficial with this population (Tallal, 2000).

The third group of students described by Dinklage (1971) appeared somewhat similar to the group with auditory discrimination difficulties described above, but also showed evidence of verbal memory difficulties. Dinklage noted that students’ reports of their own learning difficulties, teachers’ observations, and psychoeducational testing corroborated that the students could remember what they saw in print but not what they heard spoken in the foreign tongue. They appeared to experience a tentative hold on the auditory material that precluded them from maintaining crucial information in memory. Recent studies of students with language learning disabilities have shown that verbal working memory is often compromised in some of these students (Tallal, 1987; Brady, 1986; Liberman et al., 1982; Torgesen et al., 1994).

At the time of Dinklage’s (1971) study, the solution to the inability to learn a foreign language at Harvard University was resolved by a waiver of the language requirement. Although Dinklage’s findings were reported over three decades ago, these profiles have been cited in nearly every subsequent paper on foreign language learning difficulties. The observations that Dinklage made then still hold true today. Papers by Sparks et al. (1989), Sparks and Ganschow (1991), and Ganschow et al. (1998) support Dinklage’s account of deficit profiles and underscore that students who have great difficulties learning a foreign language exhibit processing weaknesses in phonology, syntax, and/or semantics in their native languages. Many college students have learned to compensate for deficits in their native languages by taking more time to read, study, etc., but when confronted with the linguistic demands of learning a new language, these deficits resurface, and the compensatory strategies that were once successful are inadequate in the context of acquiring a foreign language (Sparks & Ganschow, 1991).

In 1987, Anna H. Gajar conducted a study at Pennsylvania State University that involved using the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) (Carroll & Sapon, 1989). In this study she attempted to present a method for identifying behaviors that would serve as predictors of success in learning a foreign language at the university level. Gajar (1987) compared the performance of non-learning-disabled students with learning-disabled students using the MLAT. The MLAT consists of five subtests: (a) number learning, (b) phonetic script, (c) spelling clues, (d) words in sentences, and (e) paired associates. Gajar found that students with learning disabilities had significantly lower performance on all five of the MLAT subtests. The learning disability students had particular difficulty on two of the subtests: words in sentences, which measures sensitivity to grammatical dimensions of language, and paired associates, which measures skills in the rote memory aspects of learning a foreign language (Ganschow, Sparks, Javorsky, Pohlman, & Bishop-Murbury, 1991).

Shortly after Gajar’s study, Goodman, Freed, and McMannus (1988) conducted a similar but independent experiment at the University of Pennsylvania to further
assess the utility of using the MLAT as a diagnostic instrument for predicting foreign language success. Although the two studies produced similar results, these authors concluded that no adequate battery of tests existed for determining how specific learning disabilities affect foreign language learning.

In their article titled “Profiles of Frustration: Second Language Learners,” Ganschow and Myer (1988) noted that an auditory syllable discrimination task served as the best predictor of foreign language acquisition at the beginning of second-year language study in the tenth grade. Auditory syllable discrimination predicted foreign language learning in three languages: German, French, and Spanish. Another study, initiated by the same researchers, compared both successful and unsuccessful foreign language learners. Ganschow and Myer advanced the “auditory syllable discrimination theory” by connecting phonological difficulties to problems experienced when learning foreign languages. They maintained that “foreign language problems arise when students encounter a new code and cannot rely on meaning to support the decoding process” (p. 539). They further stated that unsuccessful learners perform “significantly poorer than successful learners on tests measuring ability to identify single words in reading, synthesize isolated sounds into meaningful words, and spell words” (p. 539).

**Observations of Unsuccessful Foreign Language Learners**

The university/college foreign language requirement is designed to introduce students to an L2, and serves as a foundation from which advanced level language skills may be developed. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) provides guidelines for beginning language instruction. As noted by Omaggio Hadley (1993), “The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, published in November 1982, were the first attempt by the foreign language teaching profession to define and describe levels of functional competence for the academic context in a comprehensive fashion” (p. 9). The Inverted Pyramid representing ACTFLs language skills rating (Omaggio Hadley, 1993) is used as the model in this paper for highlighting the nature of difficulties that are observed in learning an L2. Because the first author is an instructor of German, this language will be used as the L2 to illustrate some of the points discussed below.

First, we address some global areas of difficulty that many students, even those without a language learning disability, struggle with when learning an L2. Second, we describe some of the skills that are particularly problematic for students with dyslexia and other language learning disabilities.

**Global Areas of Language Paralysis**

We have identified three areas that are particularly problematic for all L2 learners. Due to the fact that they are so pervasive in L2 learners, we have chosen to refer to three areas—memorization, anxiety, and grammar confusion—as areas of language learning “paralysis.”

**Memorization** is an essential part of any form of learning at any level but is exceptionally significant in the learning, as well as mastery, of an L2. Almost every aspect of language learning, from the first to the last lesson in the L2 class, requires students to use their ability to memorize. The impact of poor memorization skills is devastating because it almost always means poor performance in the L2 class.

While **anxiety** is common and expected in the acquisition of the L2, it can have a profoundly detrimental effect on learning if it is experienced consistently in the classroom. Students exhibit a particular fear of looking foolish when mispronouncing foreign-sounding words or making grammatical mistakes. Facilitative anxiety can be effective in the learning environment as it motivates students to be “on the ball.” However, debilitating anxiety has such a paralyzing effect on student learning that it can literally prevent a student from attempting to utter even the shortest of sounds in the L2.

**Lexical grammar confusion** can have a paralyzing effect on L2 learners by inadvertently shifting the focus from learning a concept in the target language to understanding what a term means in the scheme of grammar. Some textbooks profess to use a communicative approach to the acquisition of the L2, yet they present grammar with grammatical terminology more commonly found in textbooks that embrace the grammar-translation method of teaching used prior to the 1970s. Table 1 shows a brief summary of our observations of students’ primary learning difficulties in each of the three paralysis domains discussed above, along with recommended strategies for facilitating learning in each area.

**Specific Areas of Difficulty for Students with Language Learning Disabilities**

It is important to note that not all L2 learning difficulties are necessarily associated with a learning disorder. Sometimes there are other sources of problems exogenous in nature such as instructor or curriculum-related problems: inexperienced instructors who have not undergone proper pedagogical training for the L2 classroom; native speakers with no prior pedagogical training or experience; large classes with more than 20 students, curriculum that is overloaded with material and unrealistic goals; and classes that are too fast paced for some individuals. These are all examples of potential sources for L2 failure at the university/college level.

University students enter L2 classes with varying levels of knowledge in the L2. There are cases of students with
students have prior exposure to the L2 from a natural environment, they have already cracked the phonetic code and will not struggle as much as learning-disabled students who are being exposed to an L2 for the first time. This does not mean, however, that the experienced students do not make mistakes in spelling or word order and have no difficulty reading. These students typically show strengths when exposed to language in aural (listening)/oral (spoken) contexts; however, their writing skills often require careful monitoring, their word order in written language is often incorrect, and their reading skills, especially when reading aloud, are slower and less fluent than expected. Some of these students, however, can be quite successful in the L2 and not only pass the requirement but also advance to upper levels of the language. We have even witnessed such students in L2 graduate programs. However, even these highly talented and motivated students always require supervision and monitoring (i.e., someone to check

### Table 1

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<tr>
<th>Global Areas of L2 Paralysis and Recommended Strategies to Assist Learning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Paralysis</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Memorization</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lexical &amp; grammatical confusion</td>
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their spelling and word order in their written work). (See Table 2.)

The psychosocial problems experienced by many students with learning disabilities range from mild to severe (Ryan, 1997). Based on observations made by the second author, who directs a language learning disability diagnostics clinic, generally students who have been identified with an learning disability prior to entering college and who are permitted to take advantage of all accommodations afforded by their institutions are the most successful in meeting their career goals and avoiding serious psychosocial problems associated with stress and depression. Stein (1987) noted that “[h]aving a learning problem is like living in a maze... you try different ways of approaching a learning task, but they never seem to work. You feel lost, unable to find an exit” (p. 409).

### Overall Student Achievement Observations

The rule of thumb used by the first author when teaching German as the L2 is that when a student has difficulty achieving a B or better in the first semester/phase of beginning German, the student is at great risk for failing to complete the foreign language requirement. In the second semester of beginning German language, approximately a few weeks before the midpoint of the semester, this student will exhibit significant difficulties in learning the material. By the second half of the semester, the student is likely to consider dropping the course because it is apparent that this individual is unlikely to achieve an adequate grade. In fact, if a student has a grade of C in the first semester of beginning German, the odds of that student not being able to fulfill the requirement are high. Further, students who “just get by” with a C in the second semester of beginning German are also at high risk of not passing the language requirement. This subgroup of “high-risk” students, who

### Table 2

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<tr>
<th>ACTFL Novice Levels</th>
<th>Major Areas of Difficulty</th>
<th>Teaching/Learning Strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low Novice level/first or second semester L2</strong></td>
<td>Abstract concepts: telling time and use of numbers</td>
<td>Multimodality approaches (i.e., use of clock with movable hands linking time with routine activity).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Memorizing gender of nouns</td>
<td>Assign color codes to genders and use index cards.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Remembering stem vowel changes in verbs</td>
<td>Make use of color coding or highlighting vowel changes.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mid Novice/second or third semester L2</strong></td>
<td>Tenses (present and past perfect)</td>
<td>Employ color coding and highlighting strategies that enable students to visually distinguish differences (i.e. in tenses, auxiliary verbs, adjective endings or endings on comparisons of adverbs and adjectives).</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Adjective endings</td>
<td>Illustrate how complex word order can be dissected into main clauses and/or subordinate clauses by creating sentence puzzles whereby the instructor cuts parts of a sentence into pieces and has students put the pieces together to form the complex sentence(s).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comparison of adverbs as adjectives</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Complex word order</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High Novice/third or fourth semester L2</strong></td>
<td>Subjunctive mood</td>
<td>Minimize and reduce the mastery of these concepts to realistic and practical use in the language.</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Passive voice in all its tenses</td>
<td>Regarding the subjunctive mood for example, use “würden + infinitive” for conversational situations.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Extended adjective phrases</td>
<td>Limit the tenses in the passive voice to the present, simple past, and present perfect since they are enough for conversational use.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Opt to only introduce extended adjective phrases for the purpose of reading comprehension for a more advanced level; do not expect students to master this grammar concept in the last semester/phase of the beginning language program.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
succeed in passing the requirement, do so because their consistent class participation and high motivation as well as their diligent completion of homework and lab assignments boost their overall grade average in the course.

A problem experienced by many L2 instructors is that a student's grade does not necessarily reflect his or her language proficiency. Hence, the letter grade assigned to the student at the end of the semester may not be a true representation of the student's proficiency. The solution to this problem is simple, although seldom instituted: Require students to pass an exit exam developed by the department of the target language and based on departmental curriculum. The exam could be an Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) if a licensed examiner is available in the department or at the institution. This exam could be administered at the termination of every course to measure students' L2 proficiency across all areas (i.e., lexicon, grammar, etc.) Although a Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI) would be easier to administer than an OPI, a SOPI would not be as useful for course placement at lower level(s). SOPI is a better

[Table 3]

CHECKLIST FOR WARNING SIGNS OF L2 LEARNERS AT RISK FOR SERIOUS DIFFICULTIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General problems</th>
<th>Specific problems</th>
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<tr>
<td>_____Student's attendance is perfect, homework and assignments are done on time or even earlier than requested, but he/she is not performing well on quizzes and tests.</td>
<td>_____Student has trouble listening to the lesson and simultaneously taking notes from transparencies or the blackboard. Consequently, student finds overhead transparencies too distracting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____Student often seems confused during lessons and will either raise his/her hand frequently to ask questions or will retreat into silence until the end of the lesson when he/she can ask question(s) face to face with instructor.</td>
<td>_____Student appears to not be following directions and activities as quickly as peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____Student is unable to cope with the material and demonstrates inappropriate behavior in the classroom such as aggressive behavior toward the instructor, indicating that student is frustrated and angry with the learning process.</td>
<td>_____Student's spelling errors are more frequent than peers' errors and don't seem to match the norm of expected mistakes at the Novice level of L2 acquisition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____Student needs more time in completing tasks, quizzes, and exams.</td>
<td>_____Students confuses letters b and d and p and q and will often transpose letters (i.e., writing the German definite article die as dei).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____Student has general problems following directions, can be easily distracted, or will miss subtle nuances in the second language.</td>
<td>_____Student is not able to break down information fast enough to effectively follow entire lesson.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____Student works at a slower pace than the other students.</td>
<td>_____Student has problems memorizing lists of words or sentences that require oral responses reproducing the exact order. This is especially problematic with longer lists or sentences. Student will still be thinking about the first item on the list and will lose the items that follow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____Student finds that the spoken language on the language lab tape is too fast to follow.</td>
<td>_____Student will have problems with dictations either in a practice exercise or in an exam. The student will predictably fail the exercise or that part on the exam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____Student asks instructor to repeat words and phrases more than peers do.</td>
<td>_____Student has problems writing on the blackboard without making noticeable spelling mistakes or leaving out words entirely that are pertinent to the exercise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____Student needs to constantly make visual links with phonetic sounds.</td>
<td>_____Student needs to constantly make visual links with phonetic sounds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____Student has total inability to master stem vowel changes in L2 verbs even though he/she understands the grammar concept and the relevance to it.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____Student will excel at completing difficult tasks in which the directions are simple but fail completing simple tasks in which the directions are more involved.</td>
<td>_____Student will excel at completing difficult tasks in which the directions are simple but fail completing simple tasks in which the directions are more involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____Student will sometimes select the wrong letter for a correct answer in a multiple choice exam. For exam, will want to circle b but selects d instead.</td>
<td>_____Student will sometimes select the wrong letter for a correct answer in a multiple choice exam. For exam, will want to circle b but selects d instead.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____Student needs to break down information slowly and more frequently than peers.</td>
<td>_____Student needs to break down information slowly and more frequently than peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____Student performs better in testing situations that require a single task (i.e. fill-in-the-verb forms and adjective endings).</td>
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placement instrument for more advanced levels of the target language because it requires the student to use language in connected discourse (Stansfield, 1989). Some signs of the types of problems that are most apparent in L2 students who have language learning disabilities are shown in Table 3.

**Academic Options for Students Who Have Foreign Language Learning Difficulties**

Due to federal mandates, a heightened awareness of learning disabilities has propelled colleges and universities into developing special services for students “documented as learning disabled.” In fact, Lipkin (1999), a specialist in learning disabilities, recently published The Nationwide Guide to Colleges with Programs or Services for Students with Learning Disabilities. This informative guide profiles more than 770 colleges and universities nationwide that offer programs and services for students with learning disabilities.

With regard to the foreign language requirement, there seem to be two alternatives: waivers and course substitutions. Superficially, the alternatives look like a solution. However, they do not fully address the problem. Waivers, although granted at many institutions (see Lipkin, 1999), are not necessarily a solution. Theoretically, it makes no sense to have a requirement that is not required. Furthermore, for the student who wishes to learn a foreign language, waivers and course substitutions are not always adequate solutions. In general, foreign language instructors are also not pleased with the philosophy behind this course of action. The sentiment is that there is no equivalent to proficiency. Additionally, the problems of administering exceptions are impossible to manage uniformly. Usually one precedent will beg the next, until the pith of the requirement has been totally compromised.

But what do students do who are either not documented as learning disabled (for which no waiver or substitution would be a viable solution) or who are enrolled at institutions that do not offer special services? Furthermore, how should foreign language instructors deal with these students? The following section attempts to address some of these issues.

**Recommendations for Modified Teaching Methods**

Although the problems Harvard students were encountering in the late 1960s and early 1970s were solved by a waiver of the foreign language requirement, Dinklage (1971) also pointed out in his study that the foreign language problem was as much a pedagogy problem as a learning difficulty. Nevertheless, Dinklage only touched the surface of this topic. Current experts in the field of learning disabilities (Ganschow & Myer, 1988; Goulandris, 2003), however, have also alluded to alternative pedagogical approaches specific to foreign language teaching. The problem remains, however, that learning disability experts do not teach foreign languages and foreign language instructors are not trained to detect problems that are associated with learning disabilities. Hence, foreign language instructors often have difficulty identifying the learning disabled students in the classroom. The Interstate New Teacher Assessment & Support Consortium (INTASC) and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) have created standards for training and preparing secondary school foreign language teachers to handle various kinds of learners and learning styles. The breakdown occurs at the university level, in the training of beginning language instructors, many of whom are graduate teaching assistants. In fact, at some institutions the graduate teaching assistants are assigned the full responsibility of teaching in beginning language programs under the direction of a supervisor. If the teaching assistants are not properly trained under the direction of an expert language program coordinator or teaching assistant supervisor, and are not in a L2 methods course in which they would have the opportunity to study diverse learning styles, they will have no awareness of learner difficulties or the ability to identify a learning disabled student in the L2 classroom. Therefore, language program coordinators must educate their trainees about learning disabilities. Furthermore, L2 instructors can inform themselves about learning differences and disabilities by contacting their university’s office of student services and, in larger schools, the office of learning disabilities. These suggestions and resources can help L2 instructors make pedagogical efforts to enhance language learning.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, when brain research was at the forefront of scientific publications concerning dyslexia, much attention was given to the impact of dyslexia and its implications on foreign language instruction. From that body of research literature information was disseminated regarding strategies to help learning disabled students succeed in the L2 classroom (Sparks, Ganschow, Artzer, & Patton, 1997; Sparks, Ganschow, Fluharty, Little, 1996). Recently, many other scholars have contributed to the research addressing the L2 problem for learning-challenged students at the secondary and postsecondary levels (Goulandris, 2003). Specialists in the area of learning disabilities have suggested that instructors should make pedagogical efforts to enhance language learning. Ganschow and Myer (1988) stated:

In the foreign language classroom, it is possible to assist students with learning disabilities directly by adopting approaches that meet their need for multisensory input. Methodological approaches seem to be helpful to learners with a learning disability because they emphasize the importance of teaching through more than one modality. Bilyeu (1982), who found that other types of language-learning difficul-
ties among learning disabled students might affect other modalities, emphasizes that the more teaching modalities one employs, the greater the chances for success (p. 47).

Ganschow and Myer (1988) also noted that the two most common modalities to use for facilitating information processing are visual and auditory; however, use of kinesthetic methods (feeling through the senses such as tracing letters) can also be beneficial. In fact, the most widely used programs for instructing students with dyslexia or specific reading disabilities (Gillingham & Stillman, 1997; Orton, 1964; Wilson, 1996) use an auditory-visual-kinesthetic (AVK) methodology for teaching reading and spelling.

The Orton-Gillingham (1964) approach to teaching reading is a structured, sequential, and multisensory technique designed to capitalize on the advantages of teaching written language by showing students how to make connections between the visual, auditory, and kinesthetic channels. Methodologies that are variations on the Orton-Gillingham approach to teaching students with dyslexia and other language learning disabilities are widely utilized throughout the United States and the United Kingdom (Gillingham & Stillman, 1997). The success of this approach is due largely to its systematic instructional techniques for teaching sound and letter pattern correspondences (Henry, 1998).

A multisensory L2 approach to teaching/learning allows instructors to employ creative teaching techniques in the curriculum that are not usually experienced in more traditional grammar translation approaches to L2 learning. In classes in which instructors employ multisensory techniques, students are engaged in kinesthetic activities that are highly interactive and are more student-centered than instructor-centered. Instructors demonstrate grammar rather than explaining it, and they provide numerous examples that enable students to deduce rules, making learning more meaningful and lasting. Often, instructors employ the use of songs and role-playing as well as games. Songs can be sung to master aspects of grammar; for example, in German instruction the German dative prepositions (aus, ausser, bei mit, nach seit von zu) can be sung to the tune of “The Blue Danube Waltz,” with the rhythmic stress of a waltz. In another exercise, an instructor may prompt the students by utilizing the imperative verb forms in the L2, and students perform corresponding actions as prompted by their instructor (i.e., open the classroom door, close the books, go to the blackboard, stand up, etc.). Through other exercises, students can learn and practice vocabulary in a meaningful context by creating their own dialogues and then acting them out theatrically. These are but a few examples of the many multisensory devices that can make the L2 more concrete and less abstract.

Instructional style for foreign language instruction is an area of investigation worthy of attention, for it holds much promise for those students struggling with foreign languages. According to education experts, learning is significantly enhanced when instructors are conscious of the learning differences among their students and when they adopt teaching strategies to accommodate these differences.

Activities that involve group and pair work in class as well as projects assigned outside of the classroom can help boost student confidence in the target language as they build on their language skills collaboratively with their peers. Strategies in the classroom that are also effective are choral repetitions of vocabulary, phrases, and verb conjugations. Students who are shy or have difficulty with pronunciation will be able to blend with the whole group as they practice mastering the pronunciation of difficult words and sounds.

For students in a foreign language class with auditory discrimination and memory deficits, the instructor must keep in mind that these students will do much better when visual material is presented simultaneously with the aural/oral task. Students with specific auditory memory deficits will perform better in an auditory task that involves contextual material. Difficulties with the recall of auditory information will continually recur if the student is confronted with pure auditory tasks that have no contextual clues and that demand verbatim accuracy. Students’ overall performances will improve when additional cues (contextual and visual, in cases where dialogues are introduced) are provided and when student responses require paraphrasing, answering questions, or giving indications of comprehension and then repetition, rather than rote repetition of material.

Foreign language instructors in particular should use overhead transparencies that are written in clear and contrasting colors and are accompanied by readily available handouts allowing students to focus on listening and learning and not copying the transparencies, rather than exclusively presenting written material on the board. Realia in the form of authentic materials, (e.g., train schedules, menus, foreign currency, posters announcing concerts or lectures, receipts from grocery stores) can also be incorporated into classroom instruction. When presenting dialogues to students, instructors can act out and gesture when and where appropriate. Instructors can also engage the students to act out the dialogues with one another in class. For aural/oral activities, instructors should always hand out printed material, such as the accompanying lyrics to a song played in class, or written activities to be assigned after a video or DVD is shown.

Additionally, if instructors hand out a daily assignment sheet at the beginning of each chapter, in which the expectations and goals of each lesson are outlined, students will know how to plan their time outside of class more effi-
ciently. If L2 instructors sense that the pace is too rapid, then the pace should be slowed down to ensure that students are grasping the tasks at hand. Testing more frequently on less material can prove more effective and be generally more helpful to students, than more traditional manners of testing with emphasis placed on comprehensive midterm and final exams. Nontraditional testing might include allowing students to create and videotape their own skits or dialogues as a major project for a midterm or final exam. Digitally created skits can then be put on the instructor’s Web page for other students to view. Furthermore, instructors can also employ the World Wide Web as a tool for reinforcing cultural and linguistic lessons. The Internet provides a virtual reality that might appeal to visual learners as they are able to visit a French village, German museum, or travel by the Inter City Express from Amsterdam to Bern.

Generally, encouraging students to feel comfortable about their performance in the classroom is very important. It is acceptable and expected that students will make mistakes, especially in introductory courses. If the pressure for perfection becomes too great, according to Krashen’s (1982) “affective filter” hypothesis, students will mentally freeze, their affective filters will rise, and they will not be able to learn effectively.

However, if the L2 instructor utilizes the techniques and methodologies described herein, many learning disabled students will have success mastering an L2, and conquer the foreign language requirement. As a result, very few students will actually need the foreign language requirement waiver.

Summary and Conclusions

Students with a disability that affects their foreign language learning are placed at an enormous disadvantage at the university level. Many colleges and universities do not recognize the number of students who, despite their own and their instructors’ efforts, simply cannot fulfill the foreign language requirement. Studies to date have not produced adequate methods or assessment procedures designed for this purpose would be enormously useful to help identify students who need modified instructional strategies or a waiver of the foreign language requirement.

In order to address the difficulties experienced by students, especially those with a history of foreign language failure, a variety of methods must be applied. Teaching techniques that employ many modalities (auditory, visual, and kinesthetic) hold much promise for allowing learning disabled students to access the world of foreign language learning.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to express their appreciation to Andrea Zilizi, a research assistant in the Communication Sciences and Disorders Department, University of Florida, who has spent many hours assisting in reviewing literature for this paper, and to Anna Matsuda, a Communication Sciences and Disorders research assistant at the University of Florida, who assisted in the editing of this paper.

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