
The Community College Perspective: New Visions, Responsibilities, and the Challenge of Teaching Students with Language-Based Learning Difficulties

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Introduction

In the wake of ACTFL's Year of Languages 2005, our profession continues to move forward in 2006 with the challenging mission of guiding our nation in valuing the importance of language learning and cultural understanding. A working knowledge of a language and the ability to behave appropriately in the culture that it represents has placed us at the forefront in helping combat terrorism and in promoting freedom and democracy. In January 2006, President George Bush announced plans to promote foreign language learning, in particular the critical languages necessary for national security. Graham (2006) reports in the *Washington Post* that the plans "aim to involve children in foreign-language courses as early as kindergarten while increasing opportunities for college and graduate school instruction." In this K-16 continuum, we expect to empower our learners with proficiency in a second language and the ability to interact in multicultural settings. We view this as a critical need for today's world citizens, who regardless of career paths will be required to interact globally in situations involving economic, social, and environmental issues.

The Community College Role

The role of the community college is vital. As institutions of higher education, our community colleges articulate clearly a critical need in serving very diverse student populations. According to the American Association of Community College's Fact Sheet (Phillippe, 2000), we enroll 46% of all U.S. undergraduates, 45% of first-time freshmen, 58% women, 42% men, 62% part-time, and 38% full-time students. Our student profiles include 47% of African-American undergraduate students, 56% of Hispanic, 48% of Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 57% of Native Americans. The average student age is 29 years.

At local levels, we serve our surrounding communities, responding to their particular needs. For example, demographic trends and world events indicate a greater need

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for teaching the less commonly taught languages, many now considered critical, e.g., Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, Hindi, Korean, Russian, and Vietnamese. The promotion of heritage language classes to strengthen near-native language skills has resulted from the increasing Hispanic population growth throughout our communities. Arabic, Korean, and Chinese are also on the rise. The specialty courses targeted for social sciences, business, tourism, and the hotel industry reflect a curriculum tailor-made for the workplace, e.g., Spanish for the Medical Professions, Spanish for Policemen and Firefighters, Spanish for Teachers, French for Tourism, and German for Business. Due to the need and popularity of American Sign Language (ASL), first- and second-year programs have been developed with full-time positions being filled wherever ASL is offered.

Our students are those who receive associate degrees, those who earn certificates, and those who take non-credit and workforce training classes. Most often, our students take language courses to fulfill a humanities requirement, to transfer credits to another institution, or for personal enrichment.

Therefore, the role of world languages programs affects the service area directly in understanding and respecting other cultures through the study of foreign languages, and by providing lifelong learning skills for career paths, enjoyment, and globalization efforts in enriching the community.

The Community College Vision

Our vision is clear. Our roles are defined. Our primary challenge is to embrace the best practices in second language learning in light of the continually changing phase of new and diverse student profiles, hybrid and online courses, heritage language programs, dual enrollment, and languages for the workplace. However, we have many new, persistent, and unresolved issues. Our institutions give us the most advanced technological equipment and training to integrate technology into our classrooms. We are given smart rooms and opportunities to offer online and hybrid classes. Yet, we still have a long way to go in the full implementation of technology. We can still do more in promoting communicative-oriented language instruction, and validating a student's level of proficiency using both formative and summative methods of measuring language skills. This assessment is crucial in placement and exit exams if we expect to create a smooth transition for students transferring into community college programs and later transferring on to colleges and universities. Due to budgetary issues, we are generally understaffed and rely heavily on our adjunct faculty colleagues, who make up 50% of our teaching faculty. Many are seasoned secondary educators coming to teach

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during our evening programs. Our teaching faculty has grown older; some are now complacent, having lost the passion of their younger years. Others are retiring and leaving leadership voids that will be hard to fill. If we prioritize our greatest need for change, however, there is one pervasive and critical issue. We have not yet fully addressed the needs of providing a truly inclusive and productive classroom environment for our students with language-based learning difficulties.

The Challenge of Teaching Students with Language-Based Learning Difficulties

Spinelli (2004) notes that the K-12 and post-secondary population is showing greater academic diversity due in part to the mainstreaming of physically, emotionally, and learning-disabled students and to the increasing paths of access to higher education for all students. She states that faculty must learn to deal with these students. Whether we are offering dual language programs, languages for the workplace, or heritage language classes, we will find a cross-section of learning disabled (LD) learners or other exceptional learners having emotional and behavior disorders, physical disabilities, or visual and deaf impairments in all of our courses.

We cannot espouse the vision and the role of world languages and cultures in today's society as a necessary requirement for all learners if we fail to make it available to all. We need to take a position that we can successfully provide second language and cultural enrichment for all learners, rather than limit the opportunity to only a selected number of students. The focus is on us to create change. Therefore, we need to revisit our past approaches and make critical changes to produce truly inclusive classrooms. We need to articulate with educators at all levels to provide best practices for teaching LD learners, and coordinate a smooth transition from one level to the next whenever possible in the K-16 continuum.

Why has it been so difficult to provide intervention strategies for our exceptional students who learn differently? Do we not boast about the quality and impact of our world languages programs? Do we not provide very practical and innovative learning and teaching approaches in student-centered and safe learning environments?

The answer is simple but the solution is complex. Research studies estimate that

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14 percent of community college learners have learning difficulties. One can speculate that greater numbers of LD students may exist in community college Spanish programs due to heavier enrollments in this discipline. Spanish represents 63 percent of language enrollments in two-year institutions (Welles, 2002, p. 8). In any case, whether enrollments reflect a greater or lesser number of individuals taking a particular language, language learners may be at risk if they have language-based learning difficulties without receiving appropriate intervention strategies.

In postsecondary settings, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires public

institutions to accommodate LD learners who provide a diagnosed documentation of a disability. A special education counselor, working closely with an LD student, provides a list of accommodations to guide an instructor in assuring that the student is protected from discrimination in the learning process. IDEA entitles students to

“a free and appropriate public education” through the provision of accommodations such as extended time on tests or books on tape; educational services such as tutoring or assistance with study skills; educationally related services such as speech or occupational therapy; and modifications to curriculum such as shorter testing, more frequent testing, or the waiver of certain requirements depending on the student’s disability-related needs. (National Council on Learning Disabilities, 2006)

At times, students having a previous documentation obtained during their secondary studies fail to request accommodation because they are ignorant of their rights, have not self-reported their needs to counselors or instructors, or may see their learning difficulties as a stigma. Unfortunately, most of these learners do not have objective evidence (documentation) that verifies a learning disability. Identifying who these learners are in the foreign language classroom is critical since such at-risk learners require very specialized language instruction. In most cases, when there is no intervention with accommodation, remediation, and compensatory strategies, these learners are doomed to fail. They generally make up the C- through F grade profiles of language learners. Almost certainly, these students are part of a silent majority that increases the attrition numbers. This scenario is also mirrored at four-year institutions.

Foreign Languages Studies and Learning Disabilities

It is important first to provide some background and connections between current foreign language (FL) study and learning disabilities — disabilities primarily seen as language-based disorders by experts. The ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education (ERIC EC) notes that the federal government defines learning disabilities in Public Law 94-142, as amended by Public Law 101-76 (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]):

Specific learning disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, or mental retardation, emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (1999)

According to The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS, 2006b), “Learning disabilities are disorders that affect the ability to understand or use spoken or written language, do mathematical calculations, coordinate movements, or direct attention. Although learning disabilities occur in very young children, the disorders are usually not recognized until the child reaches school age.” NINDS (2006a) defines Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as

a neurobehavioral disorder that affects three to five percent of all American children. It interferes with a person's ability to stay on a task and to exercise age-appropriate inhibition (cognitive alone or both cognitive and behavioral). Some of the warning signs of ADHD include failure to listen to instructions, inability to organize oneself and school work, fidgeting with hands and feet, talking too much, leaving projects, chores and homework unfinished, and having trouble paying attention to and responding to details. There are several types of ADHD: a predominantly inattentive subtype, a predominantly hyperactive-impulsive subtype, and a combined subtype. ADHD is usually diagnosed in childhood, although the condition can continue into the adult years.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder may be defined as “a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that is displayed and more severe than is typically observed in individuals at comparable levels of development” (2006).

The review of literature reveals that LD learners generally meet with failure in learning a second language (L2) since LD difficulties are language-based disorders (Sparks & Ganschow, 1993). Sparks (2005) contends that “research findings show that students who exhibit oral or written native language deficits will have problems with FL learning” (pp.43-55). The ability to understand or use spoken or written language due to visual and/or auditory processing disorders undermines the acquisition of the four skills. These difficulties affect the areas of phonology (the sound units that comprise language), morphology (word structure), syntax (the structure and rules of language), and semantics (the meaning of words) of the language. Auditory processing deficits create difficulties in developing listening, the core skill in acquiring L2 speaking, reading and writing proficiency. In citing various studies, Kirk et al. (2006a) report that an auditory processing deficit affects the storage of information in short-term memory — information that may not transfer to long-term memory. This affects the semantic memory, causing problems in encoding, cataloging and recalling information (p. 124).

In addition to these difficulties, students may have additional language problems due to possible attentional, or memory disorders. Attentional problems and poor memory retention undermine listening and reading comprehension skills or the building of essential vocabulary. Besides these language difficulties, executive function abilities affect the learning process as well. Kirk et al. (2006b) report that this executive function “regulates thinking processes, behaviors, and performance ... a type of traffic manager that monitors and controls” (p. 42). For example, some individuals have difficulty organizing and integrating thoughts and ideas when speaking and writing.

Therefore, as mentioned above, it is evident that the language-based difficulties, which LD learners demonstrate in their first language (L1), will surface as identical difficulties in learning a second language (L2). Dyslexic and ADHD/ADD learners will struggle in developing receptive and expressive language skills, and such efforts can condemn attempts to acquire proficiency in a second language. Nonetheless, a student classified with either dyslexia or ADHD/ADD can still succeed despite these odds. Proficiency in a foreign language is indeed possible depending on the level of severity of the learning disability, the provision of a supportive environment, adaptation of the

curriculum and teaching strategies, and the incorporation of technology.

Lack of Teacher Preparation in Intervention Methods

Classic approaches in LD literature include intervention methods such as accommodation, compensatory strategies, and remediation. In general, educational adaptations include modifying the learning environment, the curriculum, and teaching strategies, as well as using assistive and instructional technology. Unfortunately, very few language instructors are trained in sophisticated intervention measures. One of the most contentious issues in the field of special education is the status of current instructional practices employed to remediate students' academic deficiencies. The Chief of the Child Development and Behavior Branch within the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Dr. Reid Lyon, faults colleges and universities for not providing appropriate teacher training. Lyon agrees with numerous professionals and policy-makers that many students who eventually become identified as learning disabled are, in fact, "teaching disabled" (Patriarca & Travnika, 2003, pp. 1-3)

Teachers need guidelines and professional development for differentiating instruction. Citing Lerner (2000), Kirk et al. (2006c), advocate that the best help for teachers is to provide them with tools for identifying the academic and social problems that LD individuals have, and to provide a curriculum with strategies and materials that will help learners use their strengths to overcome their weaknesses (p. 136). When language practitioners become empowered with the knowledge that students can improve their proficiency, given appropriate instruction and assessment, then a change in attitude will take place in our profession. It will help shape a philosophy that students with language-based difficulties can and should be given the opportunity to study a foreign language. More importantly, the development of best practices will benefit LD students, as well as, *all* students.

Identifying a Learner's Learning Style and Providing Accommodation

LD learners (including dyslexic and ADHD/ADD) need to be identified very early on in beginning language classes. Their learning modality preference can quickly be identified. By using learning styles assessment instruments, instructors and learners can easily identify and capitulate on learning strengths, and accommodate weaker learning modalities. Typical accommodation includes using a variety of means to record lectures, preferred seating in the classroom environment, taking exams in a quiet environment, and receiving extra time to complete tests. As mentioned earlier, these measures for providing for accommodation are mandated by the federal laws, IDEA and *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act*, in settings receiving federal funding. In general, educators are not required to accommodate LD learners, especially when students do

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not identify themselves as such. Nonetheless, it is imperative that early in a semester, classroom instructors emphasize to *all* of their students that they will accommodate and honor *all* learning styles, and in particular, accommodate LD learners.

Compensatory Strategies

LD learners can benefit greatly when accommodation is provided for them. Of equal benefit is providing for direct instruction in language learning strategies and study skills. These strategies can be seen as compensatory strategies that help to build receptive and expressive skills in the L2 process. For instance, useful language strategies may include employing mnemonic devices to facilitate the learning of vocabulary. In addition, foreign language educators need to focus attention on instruction in study skills because LD learners require overt training in both these areas. Sedita (1996) observes that most college students have learning processes intact to create the necessary organizational and study strategies to be successful in their college classes. These are skills in organizing, processing, and comprehending what is read or heard, planning homework and long-term assignments, studying for tests, and determining good test-taking strategies. However, at-risk learners do not automatically and instinctively develop these strategies in their first language unless they take study skills classes. Sedita proposes that

Other students, however — particularly those with learning disabilities — need direct, systematic instruction to develop these skills. Learning disabilities related to reading, spelling, and writing skills; concrete or abstract organization skills; short- or long-term memory; or attention controls affect certain students’ ability to self-design and independently apply study strategies. These students can learn study skills, but they need specific instruction and sufficient practice to do so. (2006)

Two decades earlier, McKeachie (1988) had already noted that there was a body of research demonstrating that learning disabled individuals could be trained in more effective study strategies (p.6). Consequently, it is not uncommon now, twenty years later, to browse through the Internet sites of various college and university student learning centers to discover that these institutions provide a variety of study skill components beneficial to all students. These include organizational skills, study/reading systems, test preparation and test taking, goal setting, attitude, time management, vocabulary building, listening skills, basic reading skills, memory and concentration techniques, note taking, critical thinking/problem solving, library skills, research writing, and speed reading. It is evident that instructors can easily provide direction in study skill training via the Internet as another means of intervention.

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Remediation

Hodge (1998) notes that “in the larger picture of intervention strategies for at-risk learners, remediation should be the first and most important of the

three building blocks when providing accommodation, compensatory strategies, and remediation in a foreign language setting. Yet, it is the most difficult one to implement because it requires specialized training and a one-to-one tutorial approach” (p.73). LD Resources (2005) defines remediation as a “process in which an individual is provided instruction and practice in skills which are weak or nonexistent in an effort to develop/ strengthen these skills.” Remediation training for dyslexic students involves phonemic and phonological awareness. Phonemic awareness is recognition of individual sounds in spoken words. This is an awareness that words and syllables are made up of speech sounds that are represented by alphabetic symbols or letters. Phonological awareness is an ability to rhyme, isolate the beginning or ending sound of a word, delete and substitute parts of a word into a syllable. Ideal training in remediation programs provided by Orton-Gillingham practitioners involve a structured, sequential and cumulative approach.

Students begin by reading and writing sounds in isolation. Then they blend the sounds into syllables and words. Students learn the elements of language, e.g., consonants, vowels, digraphs, blends, and diphthongs, in an orderly fashion. They then proceed to advanced structural elements such as syllable types, roots, and affixes. As students learn new material, they continue to review old material to the level of automaticity. The teacher addresses vocabulary, sentence structure, composition, and reading comprehension in a similar structured, sequential, and cumulative manner. (Academy of Orton-Gillingham Practitioners and Educators, 2005)

Technology

Technology becomes a powerful tool in accommodating and providing compensatory strategies. LD learners learn best when instructional and/or assistive technology become needed tools for successful learning. In instructional technology, the use of computer software tutorials and the Internet enhance tactile/kinesthetic strengths, and help strengthen the weaker learning modalities by building the auditory and visual modalities. As Singhal (1997) observes, the Internet provides supplemental language activities that provide students with additional practice in specific areas. These include reading tests and comprehension questions, grammar exercises, pronunciation exercises possible through the available multimedia capabilities, cloze tests, and vocabulary exercises to mention a few.

An excellent source of online materials can be found in MERLOT’s World Languages Portal (2006). MERLOT is the acronym for Multimedia Educational Resources for Learning and Online Teaching. MERLOT’s World Languages Portal (2006), one of fifteen discipline communities, is an educational resource for teaching and learning languages. A wide variety of materials exists with over 1500 submissions for use online and for incorporating mutisensory

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instruction in the classroom. Here, a learner can be directed to an ever-growing collection of tutorials, simulations, animations, web quests, drills, realia, and reference tools.

Assistive technology benefits not only those learners who have visual or auditory impairments, but all types of learners. According to the DO-IT Center of the University of Washington (2002), “assistive and adaptive technology do not ‘cure’ a specific learning disability. These tools compensate rather than remedy,

allowing a person with an LD to demonstrate his intelligence and knowledge.” Effective computing tools can include (1) word processors for spelling checking or grammar usage, (2) reading systems, e.g., JAWS, that allow text on a screen to be read aloud, (3) concept mapping software that facilitates organizing ideas for writing and speaking, and (4) speech recognition software that employs a microphone to convert speech into a machine-readable format. The availability of such technology enhances the learning process directly, and complements dramatically all types of intervention efforts.

Establishing Best Practices

As mentioned earlier, educational change must include adapting the learning environment, the curriculum, teaching strategies, and the use of technology. Practitioners can begin to create ideal settings with best practices that (a) emphasize specific training in phonological, morphological, syntactical and semantic aspects of the language, (b) include a multisensory approach to teaching the foreign language through the use of visual, auditory, and tactile/kinesthetic learning pathways, (c) reduce the course content with a slower and controlled pacing of the presentation of material with time for frequent review of oral and written materials, and (d) provide for much individual attention and tutorial assistance with mastery learning strategies to help break instruction into learnable units according to an individual’s level of understanding. In essence, we must help these learners learn how to learn. If our profession is sincere about resolving these critical and pervasive issues surrounding the education of LD and ADHD/ADD learners, we should heed the recommendations implied in current research. Sparks (2005), one of the most recognized seminal researchers in this field, proposes three courses of action. He advises that students’ disability classifications not be used to predict their future performance in FL courses or as a marker to recommend course substitutions for the FL requirement. He recommends that students classified as LD and ADHD/ADD be encouraged to enroll in FL courses and be provided with instructional accommodations by their instructors. He also encourages FL department chairs to take the lead in helping their faculty members develop, learn, and use teaching techniques that benefit at-risk FL learners (43-50).

Articulation

How then, do we articulate with each other to provide for successful inclusion in our classrooms? Are intervention strategies similar at primary, secondary, and higher

education levels? How can we adapt our curricula and incorporate effective teaching strategies?

A promising and hopeful endeavor has been the recent efforts of the Italian Cultural Society and Casa Italiana in Washington, DC, to provide Italian teachers a graduate 500-level course in effective teaching strategies for second language learners with special needs. Twenty Italian teachers, representative of the K-16 continuum from surrounding school jurisdictions, colleges, and universities are now applying the best practices in their classrooms. In the area of technology, I have created an online site for Spanish LD language-learners with the intention of incorporating intervention strategies on the web. The site, *Aprendiendo se aprende*, (www.nvcc.edu/home/nvhodgm/aprendiendo), includes multisensory tutorials in Spanish to (a) develop phonemic and phonological awareness, and (b) gain knowledge of grammar, sentence variation and the mechanics of language. The site also includes Internet links to resources for language learning strategies, study skills, and general LD resources. Most importantly, efforts such as these are needed in all of the language disciplines and at all levels of instruction at K-16 levels. We need to advocate as a profession to find funding for professional training, create special interest groups (SIGs) specific for teaching LD learners, and participate in listservs to continue the dialogue of what is working in our classrooms.

It will be through our organizations like the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, language-specific organizations, and our state foreign language associations where we can share our knowledge and experience, and continue to articulate our hopes, dreams, and concerns for our world languages profession.

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