

Teaching Languages to students with Specific Learning Differences

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This practical, new publication in the Multilingual Matters textbooks series is for all teachers of languages who seek to work more effectively with learners who have specific learning differences such as dyslexia. The authors have considerable experience in working with language learners with special needs at all levels from school to university and the book provides a comprehensive introduction to the field; outlining the discourses of Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) and associated differences; summarising cognitive and social aspects of language learning; tracing the path of a SpLD student through identification, assessment and progression. The book also includes a variety of strategies and techniques for language teaching and learning. Each chapter ends with a summary of key points and also lists activities that may be used with teachers or student teachers of languages. There are also some appendices containing model lesson plans. It is written in an easily accessible style and although the content is mostly practical, the two authors also include references to relevant research, including their own, in every section. It is not possible to give a fully evaluative review of a handbook -style publication such as this, so the following provides an overview of key aspects of the book that make it indispensable reading for teachers of English as an additional language.

Overview of chapters

Chapter 1 – Views of Disability in Education

This introductory section reviews the models of disability reflected in the different discourses from the 19th to 21st centuries. The authors encourage the reader to challenge the dominant medico-legal discourse and the professionals who seek to distance themselves from their ‘clients’ by using Greco-Latin vocabulary and labels. They view teachers as the intermediaries and translators of these discourses who can empower their learners by interpreting ‘disability’ and ‘difficulty’ as ‘difference’ and thus facilitating inclusion.

Chapter 2 – What is dyslexia?

In this chapter the authors review the current definitions of dyslexia accepting the best one as being that of the International Dyslexia association which is ‘*Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and / or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction.*’ They also discuss the behavioural manifestations of dyslexia that persist even when learners have been able to overcome their literacy difficulties. The chapter also reviews a variety of cognitive and neurological explanations of dyslexia such as the Phonological Deficit Hypothesis.

Chapter 3 – Associated Learning Differences

It is now commonly accepted that dyslexia is very much a dimensional, rather than ‘*all or nothing*’ state and that it is associated with a range of other learning differences. The features of these associated differences frequently overlap with dyslexia and also persist into adulthood. This chapter outlines many of these including; Specific Language Impairment (SLI), dyspraxia, dyscalculia, and attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder. It is helpful for language teachers to understand that a major difference between those with dyslexia and SLI is that the latter demonstrate difficulties with the acquisition of grammatical morphology such as past tense endings, whereas dyslexic students do not. This also means that early stage EAL learners may be wrongly diagnosed as having SLI rather than the normal development of a second language. The chapter ends with a section on Aspergers syndrome as this also can present difficulties in learning a second language.

Chapter 4 – Cognitive and Emotional Aspects of Language Learning

This chapter will be of particular interest to those who teach English as an additional language or are researching the processes of second language acquisition. The authors have surveyed studies which looked at cognitive aspects involved in language learning. There is also emphasis on the affective factors such as motivation, and Kormos' own research into the motivational characteristics of dyslexics is referenced. The second half of this chapter provides a summary of the language learning difficulties of students with a SpLD covering: vocabulary learning in a second language when the phonological short-term memory can store less information than students with no SpLD; acquisition of grammar; reading and writing in a second language; producing and understanding oral texts.

Chapter 5 - Identification and Disclosure

EAL professionals often ask how they would find out whether a bilingual student who is failing to make good progress has an additional learning need. This chapter provides helpful guidance for all language teachers in the process of identifying SpLD, although it does not refer to specific national guidelines for assessment and intervention. The authors discuss other important issues such as the dangers of labelling individuals before definite identification is made, suggesting that teachers use more descriptive functional labels such as, 'the learner has an auditory processing weakness.' They discuss in more detail the process of observation, screening and formal identification including a list of commonly used assessment tools. There is also a section that looks at the most appropriate screening assessments for using in a second language context.

Chapter 6 – Accommodating differences

Many of the accommodating strategies in this chapter will be familiar to the EAL teacher, for example the use of larger, sans serif fonts such as comic sans and century gothic. Other aspects such as the light, temperature and volume of the classroom may not have occurred to language teachers as affecting the learner in such a profound way. The authors discuss at some length the relative merits of computer based or paper based

writing technologies for different tasks in the language learning classroom, with the overarching philosophy that the appearance and use of materials should cause 'as little stress as possible' to SpLD learners who are often prone to sensory overload. The rest of the chapter covers aspects of curriculum and task design and classroom management. The section that I found most useful explained methods of teaching meta-cognitive thinking skills such as mapping out a study schedule for a research project or checking the understanding of a particular grammatical teaching point.

Chapter 7 – Techniques for Language Teaching

This chapter considers multi-sensory teaching methods for teaching the essential languages skills; vocabulary, grammar, speaking and listening, reading and writing. For example, one page illustrates visual techniques for teaching the sound and spelling system of the second language. The section on reading is particularly pertinent in these phonics -orientated times. The authors emphasise the critical importance of giving SpLD learners enough time to establish the oral language phase before introducing word reading and lower order decoding skills. They also reinforce the importance of using pre-reading activities that activate background knowledge and give students a motivation for persevering with longer texts. Perhaps a major difference in teaching a second language to dyslexic learners is that they need lots more practice opportunities in order to automatize grammatical constructions.

Chapter 8 – Assessment

After a brief overview of the key types of assessment in which the authors helpfully clarify the terms, issues of validity and fairness for students with SpLD and SEN are discussed. Kormos and Smith are particularly concerned about the fairness of high stakes proficiency testing for SpLD students. Much of the chapter is given to considering various accommodations and modifications that ensure that language assessments are fair to SpLDs whilst remaining valid tests overall. An example given is the case of a dyslexic student receiving a read aloud accommodation on a reading comprehension test. This gives an unfair advantage in that the student does not have to decode as well as comprehend the written text. Therefore this accommodation would be a modification which affects the construct validity of the test. Whereas an accommodation that

allows the dyslexic student to give oral answers would not affect the overall validity of the reading test. A helpful flow chart is provided to support teachers in thinking through these issues.

Chapter 9 – Transition and Progression

This final section contains reflections on some of the difficulties second language learners with additional needs may have navigating new environments at education transition points, including moving countries. The authors' definition of a transition as entailing a shift in self-identity and status within a community leads them to view the process within an integrated model incorporating environmental, cognitive, social and psychological development. They go onto to look at strategies that both the learner and the receiving institution can do to ease the transition process.

I found the book both interesting and illuminating. It has clarified several misconceptions I had about the linguistic ability of students with dyslexic tendencies as well as reinforcing many of my beliefs about the ensuring the most supportive conditions for second language acquisition in schools. Whilst not written exclusively for teachers of EAL, it has so much sound advice and support for EAL teaching and learning in mainstream contexts.