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*“What opportunities are being created for students with disabilities in learning a foreign language”*

**Abstract:** *The number of students with learning disabilities (LD) attending postsecondary institutions has increased steadily over the past two decades. Many of these students have language-based learning difficulties that create barriers to success in foreign language (FL) courses. Many institutions have responded by providing these students with exemptions or alternative courses. Although exemptions and alternatives are needed by some students with severe language difficulties, the literature is increasingly indicating that many of these students can successfully complete FL curricula. This is especially true when accommodations and specialized teaching methodologies are implemented in sections of FL courses designed specifically to meet the needs of students with LD. The purpose of this article is to describe FL course accommodations supported by existing literature and field-based experiences. The article also highlights the benefits of successful FL experiences for students with LD.*

**Keywords:** *foreign language, motivation, inclusive education, special needs students, adaptive educational environment.*

Foreign language study is an increasingly prominent part of education everywhere. Not only are high school students nearly always required to study a foreign language, but many lower and middle schools have added foreign languages to their curricula, whether as an enrichment or a requirement. Foreign language “magnet” schools have been created in some school districts and seem to be very popular. And of course, it’s more common than not that colleges and universities require foreign language study for graduation. For the student unencumbered by a learning disability, foreign language study is indeed an enriching and rewarding experience. For the learning disabled student, however, it can be an unbelievably stressful and humiliating experience, the opposite of what is intended.

While it has long been recognized in the learning disabilities field that foreign language study would be a terrific challenge to learning disabled students, somehow this fact has been widely ignored in the field of foreign language instruction and in schools in general until very recently. Teachers of ESL students have also recognized that there are students who have great difficulty mastering English because of learning disabilities. This fact has added some urgency to the need for recognition of this problem. As more research is being done and more teachers are recognizing the problem, more solutions are

being created for the student facing the challenge of learning a foreign or second language and the teachers who teach them.

What causes this difficulty?

The field of second language acquisition has historically blamed language learning failure on a number of factors. Anxiety in the foreign language classroom (anxiety about making mistakes in grammar and pronunciation, about understanding the teacher, about remembering vocabulary) has been prominent as a purported cause of the failure. Among other causes cited in the literature have been lack of effort, lack of motivation, poor language learning habits and low “ability” in language learning. In the late 1960’s, Dr. Kenneth Dinklage of Harvard University was compelled to find out why some of Harvard’s brightest and best were not passing their language classes. He quickly dismissed lack of effort, seeing that most of these students were putting other courses and their degrees at major risk by devoting unusual amounts of time and effort to their language classes. Similarly, lack of motivation was not a cause, as these students could not graduate without completion of their language requirement. As for anxiety, he realized that the students were coming to see him because they were suffering from extreme anxiety as a result of not being able to pass their language classes. Since most of these students had never failed a class before, he felt that anxiety had not originally played a part in their failure.

When he interviewed these students, Dinklage found that a number of the failing language students had in fact been diagnosed as learning disabled and had overcome their disability through good tutoring and very hard work; still, the foreign language course had triggered the problems the students thought were behind them. Others in the group, Dinklage found after testing, had previously undiagnosed learning disabilities; again the problems had not shown up until foreign language classes were attempted. The third part of the group, he felt, had a “language learning disability,” though Dinklage could not find the usual evidence of problems in testing. Clearly these students were unable to be successful in their foreign language study while at the same time they were excellent students in their other classes. He could find no other explanation. Then, in a kind of experiment years ahead of its time, he arranged for a graduate student who had a learning disabled sibling to teach Spanish to some of these struggling Harvard students using methods of instruction known to be helpful to those with learning disabilities. The students taught in this way were mostly able to pass the exams necessary to complete the foreign requirement.

Thus nearly 30 years ago, Dr. Dinklage pinpointed most of the basic ideas and principles relating to foreign languages and learning disabilities: The problem was related to being learning disabled, not to lack of motivation or effort or to anxiety by itself. Anxiety was the result of failure not the cause. Students not previously diagnosed as LD showed up as LD in the foreign language classroom. The learning disability had to be addressed in educational measures taken. Once the LD issues were addressed, the students could learn.

Once they had pinpointed what they felt was the root of the foreign language learning problem, Ganschow and Sparks began investigating ways that learning disabled students could be helped to learn a foreign language. At least two approaches to foreign language instruction different from “normal” or traditional language instruction have emerged as being effective.

The first and most researched approach is a response to Ganschow and Spark’s findings that many, if not most, students having trouble with foreign language acquisition have phonological deficits in their first language. Ganschow and Sparks theorized further that to help these students, the sound system of the target language must be very explicitly taught. In order to test this theory, Ganschow and Sparks collaborated with a high school Spanish teacher who had learned about the Orton-Gillingham method of teaching phonology, reading and spelling to very significantly learning disabled students. In this method, sounds are presented in a highly structured fashion with a great deal of visual, kinesthetic and tactile practice and input. The Spanish teacher, Karen Miller, has tested the effectiveness of teaching Spanish to learning disabled students using the Orton-Gillingham approach. The research on her students has shown quite conclusively that LD students taught Spanish in this way have been able to learn and retain it. Another collaborator, Elke Schneider, has had similar results teaching German to LD students.

The second approach to language instruction which has been effective has been to adapt the foreign language courses according to principles of instruction known to be effective for LD students. This means making such changes as reducing the syllabus to the essential elements, slowing the pace of instruction quite considerably, reducing the vocabulary demand, providing constant review and incorporating as much visual/tactile/kinesthetic (i.e. multisensory) stimulation and support as possible. Many of these course adaptations were also responses to the specific complaints and requests of foreign language students having trouble in their classes. Furthermore, in some schools there are courses designed for the student strong in listening and speaking skills but weak in reading and writing, and vice versa. The University of Colorado at Boulder has shown this latter approach to be effective in Latin and Spanish courses adapted for LD students. A phonological component is part of this adapted curriculum.

In conclusion, again, as with all things related to learning disabilities, the answers are often complex and long-term, and each student's problem and solution may be different. The most important thing is to recognize what a challenge it is to learn a foreign language for those with learning disabilities and to create a fair and reasonable environment for the learner. Hopefully, as learning disability staff, foreign language professionals, and others become more aware of the research and literature, the path for the LD student facing foreign language requirements will be smoother.

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