

# **Principles and methods of teaching foreign languages to dyslexic learners**

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## **Introduction**

It has been common knowledge for long that learning foreign languages (FLs) is a worthwhile activity, in particular for learners whose mother tongue is spoken by only a small number of people. This holds especially true in the globalised world of today, where people who do not master FLs are at a disadvantage compared to those who do. Language learning, however, is not an easy task, especially for learners with learning disorders. Yet fairness demands that they are granted the same opportunities for successful language learning as their more fortunate contemporaries who do not have learning difficulties. Luckily, the research results of the last decades have helped teachers develop a repertoire of skills, strategies and methods that can be applied in normal classes, in the spirit of inclusion, to the teaching of FLs to students with learning disorders.

Before providing an overview of the basic principles of FL teaching to students with learning disorders, we will clarify the notions of dyslexia and learning disorder, and will also examine what sort of difficulty these may cause in the acquisition of an FL.

## **The notion of learning disorder**

To put it simply, a learning disorder is the kind of problem rooted in the nervous system that makes the perception, processing, storing and retrieving of information from memory difficult for the individual. As a result, individuals are not always able to accurately make sense of what they see or hear, furthermore, are unable to relate bits of information coming from different parts of their brain. This will lead to problems with processing spoken and written language, FL learning, and counting. Their social skills can also be affected. This problem area is more common with males and left-handed individuals, and tends to run in families, that is, it can be hereditary. One cannot grow out of it and it will not come to an end on its own. Put another way, if there is no help in due time, dyslexics will have to face this problem all throughout their lives. Due to the diversity of approaches to defining the disorder, there is a wide range of views about how common it is. Therefore, one can only cautiously estimate it to concern

about 5-8% of the population. The concrete forms that these learning disorders take are dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia, that is, reading, writing and calculating difficulties. Of the three, dyslexia has been researched most extensively; thus most knowledge has been accumulated about that.

### **The effect of dyslexia on FL learning**

Depending on the degree of the hindrance of the cognitive processes taking part in language learning, a variety of problems arise from the learning disabilities of differing weight.

Ganschow and Schneider (2002) have collected the most typical language learning difficulties that can help identify learners with less and more severe difficulties.

The typical problems of students having small or medium degree learning difficulties are as follows:

- they work more slowly than others
- they are unable to answer spontaneous questions immediately
- they spend more time on learning an FL than any other school subject
- they do not know what methods to apply to learning various aspects of the language, eg.: new vocabulary items, grammatical structures or pronunciation
- they have difficulty understanding spoken language, especially when its tempo is fast
- they make spelling mistakes in writing.

Problems of learners with severe learning disorders:

- they have difficulty acquiring and recalling the sounds of the FL, particularly when these sounds do not at all or not very much resemble those of the mother tongue
- they find it difficult to reproduce heard sounds, words and expressions
- it is problematic for them to divide multi-syllable words (words with one or two suffixes, or compound words) into their components, and to read/write them
- they often do not understand and cannot accurately apply grammatical rules, mainly when they are different from the rules of the mother tongue
- understanding spoken language is rather difficult, even if the rate of delivery is slow
- they are often unable to match the oral and written forms of the same foreign word.

The language learning difficulties arising from the disorders of information processing pose a great challenge for learner and teacher alike.

As regards learners, it is important for them to recognise and accept the difficulties typical of them. They need to understand the fact that in order to perform well in language classes they need to take extra efforts, and also, they must learn to ask (their peers and teachers) for help whenever something is unclear. Occasionally, if this option is available, they may need to resort to a private instructor for help. It is a great challenge for language teachers, as well, to teach students with learning difficulties, since teacher training traditionally prepares them for the teaching of the ideal learner. The ideal learner is making progress without the explicit explanation of underlying language patterns, comprehends instructions in the target language, and is able to acquire the skills of reading, writing, listening, speaking and pronunciation by being exposed to stimuli in the FL without detailed explanations, and by having ample practice opportunities. Nevertheless, one must admit that most learners are a far cry from the ideal one described above, let alone learners with information processing difficulties. Therefore, traditional teaching methods are doomed to failure with them. Teachers need to be familiar with the principles and apply the specific methods of the FL teaching of dyslexics, otherwise learners with learning disorders will fall behind their peers for certain. In addition, FL teachers must create an anxiety- and stress-free, friendly and accepting environment, which satisfies the diverse needs of mixed ability students and does not destroy their self-confidence.

### **Basic principles of the language teaching of dyslexic students**

Taking into account the characteristic features of students with learning disorders and the difficulties that derive from their language learning deficits, experts recommend a multisensory, structured, and metacognitive approach as the most effective one (Schneider & Crombie, 2003; Ganschow & Schneider, 2006; Sparks, Artzer et alii, 1998; Birsch, 2005; Sparks & Miller, 2000). The basic principles of this approach resemble to a large extent the ones applied in the teaching of the mother tongue to dyslexics (Birsch, 2005; Schneider & Crombie, 2003; Ganschow & Schneider, 2006). In what follows, we are going to provide an overview of these principles and the teaching tips based on them.

#### **Multisensoriality (Multisensory approach)**

The essence of the multisensory approach is that students perceive the input through more than one sensory channel, which means that there is visual, auditory, as well as tactile-kinaesthetic information processing in parallel. As a result, the same information leads to the development of various engrams in the brain, which in turn facilitates the coding, storage and retrieval of information from memory,

thus enhancing the efficiency of learning. This is very useful for all learners, but is of utmost importance for the ones with learning disorders, because they can only make use of a limited amount of the incoming information, due to the deficits of their visual and/or auditory information processing. This is exactly why more senses must be involved at the same time, particularly the tactile and kinaesthetic channels (touching and movement, respectively). Experts have observed that in cases when a learner is unable to memorise a concept or word either through the visual or the auditory channel, information can still be successfully fixed in the mind with the help of touching or movement. When visual and auditory information processing are in progress, the simultaneous kinaesthetic-tactile perception facilitates the forming and fixing of associations among the pieces of information. In language teaching, however, touching and movement are rarely applied for fixing the input. The question arises then how these two sensory modalities could be exploited more often in the language classroom.

- We should not forget that there is some movement even when one speaks or writes. While the former activity involves the muscles of the mouth and other speech organs, the latter exercises those of the fingers, the forearm and upper arm. Consequently, these two activities could be more often integrated into classroom work. Moreover, we should call students' attention to the importance of saying the material out aloud while learning at home, (which will also help auditory engrams develop), and of writing down new information.
- Project work provides excellent opportunities for the development and reinforcement of visual and tactile-kinaesthetic engrams. Because of the variety and multitude of stimuli inherent in project work, making projects is one of the most effective methods of acquiring and expanding topic-related vocabulary.
- More and more teachers recognise the importance of role-play in language teaching, since role plays also involve students' emotions, which makes the fixing of information in the mind deeper and longer lasting. The role play is an excellent means of teaching pragmatics, as well, since learners can acquire the expressions most appropriate to the particular situation they are modelling at class.
- Students can apply mimics, gestures and movements in a playful way, in pairs or groups, for the activation of vocabulary (and for fixing the meaning at the same time).
- Using and manipulating cards for the acquisition of words and grammatical items provide learners with a large amount of tactile-kinaesthetic input. Any other object can be used for the same purpose, such as wood boxes of different sizes, toys, buttons, letters made of wood or plastic, etc.
- We should not introduce more than one or two new sounds or symbols at a time. Demonstrating a

new or unusual sound, we should ask learners to mimic our lip movements, and to follow with their fingers the shape of the letter corresponding to the sound in their books or exercise books, while pronouncing it at the same time. A good way of reinforcing the phoneme–grapheme relationship is for learners to write the shape of the letter in the air by hand, while saying the phoneme out aloud simultaneously.

But besides touching and movement, we should certainly emphasize visuality as well. Whenever possible, let us apply visual aids, such as pictures, for the teaching of new words; hand and lip movement to illustrate a sound; and colour coding to help the memorisation of words, suffixes and articles that differ by gender. The point of colour coding is that students use different colours for the recording of words of different gender in their copybooks. Obviously, words of the same gender must be written in the same colour all the time.

#### Constant practising and repetition

Learners with language learning disorders need far more practising to develop automatism in any stage of their learning. But automatism can only be achieved through overlearning, which is very tiresome, and requires huge commitment from both the learner and teacher. On top of that, it can become extremely boring, which undermines motivation. One way to prevent this is to practise the same material or learning step with a series of activities and in a variety of contexts that involve more senses (that is, in a multisensory way). For example, when we want our students to use an item accurately, then instead of bombarding them with tons of traditional pen-and-paper exercises, we should use cards, integrate the particular item into scenes for them to act out, or show a film featuring the item. Practising the material in so many ways will prevent boredom evolving in the classroom. In addition, the benefits of multisensory learning discussed above will further enhance the positive effect of overlearning.

What other suggestions are there for the use of this method?

- Practising is not enough. Let us provide opportunities for the regular and diverse revision of certain materials, in a variety of exercises.
- Dyslexic students must be made aware of the importance of overlearning and the way to it, practising (that is, they must understand that automatic use of the language in speaking or in writing is not available for them without overlearning). It must also be made clear that there is no alternative to this overwork.
- There should be ample opportunities for practising notions and linguistic items within guided pair work activities, where abler students are paired up with less able ones.

- In order that students can memorise the material effectively, they should be given enough time to discover, try out and choose the mnemonics best suited for them.

There is no overemphasizing the importance of this principle for efficient grammar as well as vocabulary acquisition: poor verbal memory and the deficiencies of the mechanical rote learning of nonsense words (which equals the difficulties of FL vocabulary learning) can only be compensated for by the daily learning and revising of words.

#### Structure, sequentiality, logical building

Most learners with learning disorders are virtually unable to identify, imagine and create sequence, or to discover language patterns for themselves. Consequently, it is the language teacher's job to create the structure for them in which certain materials follow each other in a logical and accessible sequence, and the relationships among parts of the material are clear. How can we implement these three principles in the classroom?

- Whenever introducing new topics, concepts or language patterns, teachers should strive to link materials to each other and/or to students' existing knowledge. We must not take for granted that students will discover the logical relationships on their own. Instead, we must either highlight these, or guide students to discover them for themselves, applying metacognitive strategies. Let us help our learners categorize new concepts as well.

- Let us progress from the simple towards the more complex materials, from the receptive to the productive exercises. Teacher guidance should also diminish as the students' performance improves.

- Units must be broken down into accessible, manageable, logically built units, and relationships among these explicitly highlighted.

- At the beginning of classes teachers should tell students about what material they are planning to present and practise. Once a task is completed, they should tell students aloud about this and the next activity.

#### Teaching components of the target language explicitly

Learners with learning disorders must be provided with clear explanations and demonstrations of all the rules, notions and concepts related to the phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics of the target language, because these learners, we have seen, are unable to perceive and deduce rules and characteristic features of the language. Not even students with above-average intelligence are able to compensate for this deficit. Let us take an example for this from phonology. If the German teacher does not emphasize explicitly that the German diphthong, "eu", is pronounced in the same way as the first

two sounds in the Hungarian word “ajtó”, students are unlikely to notice this similarity between the two languages on their own. What suggestions can be offered then on the basis of this principle?

- Due to the difficulties in perceiving speech sounds, FL sounds and the corresponding letters must be demonstrated and taught in an explicit way. In order that the students will have a sense of achievement as soon as possible, let us progress from the most to the least common sounds. If possible, we should have a short phonetics training focussing on the phonetic features of the mother tongue before the FL programme starts. This will help students acquire basic understanding of language, of its speech sounds, and of the phoneme-grapheme correspondence. In the second step, this knowledge must be applied for the analysis and acquisition of the phonetics of the target language. Research results confirm that the explicit teaching of the phonological system of the target language (and of the mother tongue) boosts up the performance of those who have language processing difficulties (Sparks & Ganschow, 1993; Ganschow, Sparks & Schneider, 1995).
- Owing to the deficiencies in these students’ understanding of the grammatical system, the above suggestions are worth applying to the teaching of semantics and pragmatics as well, because one can more easily grasp and learn the notions, concepts and rules of the grammatical system of the target language with a sound knowledge of the mother tongue.
- Let us make our students aware of the socio-pragmatic features of the target language (idioms, metaphors, humorous phrases, non-verbal signs of communication typical in certain situations, etc.), because the ability to “read between the lines” is as important in the FL as in the mother tongue, and contributes largely to successful communication.

### Analysis and synthesis

Being right-brain dominant individuals, students with learning deficiencies usually adopt a holistic approach to their studies. Thus breaking the language items down into their component parts or summarising them on a higher level have a positive effect on these learners’ language acquisition process. For instance, we can demonstrate dividing words into their component parts and then putting them together again, thus raising students’ awareness of the rules of word formation. Also, we could explain what parts make up a well-written letter or essay.

### Metacognition

According to the simplest definition, metacognition is thinking about thinking. In our case, it obviously means thinking about the learning process. It is common knowledge that successful learners are those who regularly think about their learning: they observe what strategies work best for them in various

circumstances, and also check the efficiency of their learning. However, in order to ponder upon our own intellectual functioning abstraction is needed. That is, we are only capable of metacognition from puberty onwards, on the highest level of cognitive development, which is the stage of formal thinking. A number of research findings show, however, that it is only a small proportion of students (university and college students included!) that think about their learning or apply strategies to acquire the material more efficiently. As the application of metacognitive strategies is not at all easy to learn, teachers had better model their use on an elementary level and encourage learners to regularly use them, well before puberty. For example, as soon as in the third grade of the primary school, learners can be asked to write down in one sentence what they did/did not do well at class or at home. Teachers can make an empty table for them in which to record the intensity of their preparation for classes. Rows of the table could indicate the days of the week, while columns are for information about the intensity, ranging from zero to 100%. Another useful method is to ask them to describe the stages of solving a problem to which logic, deduction or other cognitive skills are required. (Phillips,1993). This is a good way of encouraging thinking about learning at an early stage and laying down the foundations for higher level metacognition to appear later. All learners benefit from the clear and simple explanations of how to go about solving a particular task, what the most efficient methods of acquiring some material are, how one can check one's own learning efficiency, or what techniques enhance memorisation. For learners with learning difficulties, however, teaching metacognitive strategies explicitly is a must. One reason for this is their cognitive processing deficits, which make them unable to identify language patterns. Another is the limited capacities of their short term memory (Gerber, 1993), which makes expansion of vocabulary and memorisation of rules difficult.

On this principle, the following suggestions can be made:

- Let us help learners think about the concept to be acquired and describe it with their own words. The latter reveals whether the learner has understood the concept or not, thus it is very important.
- Let us help our learners to form the habit of approaching FL problems metalinguistically, which is a “detecting”, “riddle guessing” attitude towards language problems. The main objective is for them to think through why a particular rule applies in a given situation or to argue logically which rule or principle should apply in that situation. This attitude organically involves learning how to spot and correct one's own mistakes. A very good method of identifying one's mistakes in writing tasks retrospectively is for learners – being familiar with their own typical errors – to look through their completed texts searching for these.
- We should explain to students in an age-relevant way how memory works and what strategies follow from that, highlighting the range of mnemonic techniques available. Let us demonstrate and

practise the use of these techniques thoroughly through a number of examples at class.

- Let us encourage our learners to try out a variety of learner strategies, and to observe and record which ones helped them best to acquire the material. In addition, they should be motivated to experiment with and create new memory-enhancing techniques that they – in case they work - should share with their peers.
- Learners' conscious thinking about language can only be developed and improved if teachers themselves model it whenever possible in language classes: for example, when introducing a new concept, translating a complex grammatical structure, doing multiple choice tests, etc.

As we will have seen so far, these principles often occur, work, and take effect in combination. A careful consideration of the principles suggested for the FL teaching of learners with learning disorders reveals that they cover strategies that are effective in general, and that have always made part of good teaching practice. Yet, we must not forget that bright, apt (and preferably hard-working) learners are able to acquire the language even if some of these principles are not at all or not regularly applied. Learners with learning difficulties, however, do not have the slightest chance of successful language acquisition without the teacher consistently and systematically applying the methodological approach described above (Schneider & Crombie, 2003).

Besides the general principles, one should take into consideration the following ideas in the teaching of learners with learning deficits (Dörnyei, 2001; Schneider & Crombie, 2003; Hickey, 2000; Rome & Osman, 2002, Schneider, 1999).

### Motivation

These learners need to spend far more time and energy on language learning than their peers with a well-functioning language processing system. On top of that, progress is often slower than expected. Consequently, creating and maintaining motivation is of utmost importance in their case. Dörnyei (2001) defines the four main dimensions of motivating teaching practice as follows:

1. Creating the basic conditions for motivation, the most important of which are: appropriate teacher behaviour, a relaxed and supportive classroom atmosphere, and cohesive study groups respecting group norms.
2. Raising students' motivation by: creating positive attitudes towards the target language; adapting the material to their aims and interests; raising their success-expectancy and goal-orientation; and

finally, by creating realistic expectations about, for example, the amount of time they need to spend on successful language learning.

3. Maintaining motivation. The following ideas facilitate the maintenance and preserving of motivation:

- making the learning process stimulating and enjoyable for the learners
- presenting tasks in an inspiring way (e.g.: providing strategies to solve them, or explaining their aims and/or use)
- setting specific, short term goals for our students (e.g.: learning 10 new words a day)
- protecting our students' self-respect and boosting their self-confidence
- enabling our students to preserve and maintain a positive social self-image, which means they never lose face at class because of their poor performance
- promoting cooperation among students
- creating conditions for learner autonomy by, for example, involving them in the selection of learning tasks and materials
- promoting the use of self-motivating learner strategies, that is, helping learners motivate themselves to learn the language

4. Encouraging retrospective, positive self-evaluation. This can be achieved by providing motivating feedback, stimulating rewards and good grades.

#### Boosting self-esteem

One of the most efficient ways of boosting students' self-esteem at class is ensuring a sense of achievement. Applying in our every-day teaching practice a variety of the principles discussed above contributes positively to this cause. But besides that, conscious efforts must be made to notice and appreciate the students' slightest progress, and to allow them to show off their strengths at the FL class. Activities that require right-brain dominant thinking thus demand imagination, creativity, a holistic approach and a good sense of spatiality serve the above causes very well. These abilities can be exploited to the full in project work, story-telling and drama activities.

Teachers can also enhance students' self-esteem by evaluating their progress and achievements against their own previous attainments, rather than against others' achievements.

#### Decreasing speed and taking account of poor concentration

We must always bear in mind that the information processing of learners with learning disorders is not only insufficient, but too slow at the same time. Consequently, they need extra time to understand

spoken language, read and interpret written texts, and express their thoughts in speaking or writing, even in the mother tongue. It is only natural that the difficulties of using the mother tongue apply even more to FL use. Thus teachers must take extra care to consciously slow down their own speech rate in general, and when presenting new material and complex grammatical structures, in particular. This is even more important in the early periods of language learning and when they teach students with auditory processing deficits.

Besides the low speed of information processing, there is another factor that blocks successful FL learning: insufficient functioning of attention. The problems of insufficient concentration and the distractibility of attention are often aggravated by a further one: students with learning disorders are not able to concentrate on a task for more than maximum 10-15 minutes. This can be explained by the fact that the constant compensation for their distorted cognitive functioning requires extra concentration, and this takes up most of the energy needed to maintain high-level concentration on a task for a longer period of time. This is why we must allow these learners to stop working for a couple of minutes, and to try to relax and regenerate, once they notice that their attention has started drooping.

#### Regular consultation with the learner

In addition to applying the most suitable methods, teachers must have regular consultations with the students (or the parents of younger ones) about their language learning difficulties. Following the assessment of their strengths, weaknesses and learning styles, these consultations aim primarily at providing learners with a variety of strategies to enhance their language learning. And after they have tried out the strategies, further consultations should follow in order to discuss their experiences, the ways forward, and of course all the FL-related problems that may have cropped up. We must make learners fully aware of the fact that even though FL learning is an activity requiring extra time and effort from them, it will help them acquire the sort of linguistic and cultural knowledge that enriches their personality, and is indispensable for gathering knowledge in the globalised world of today.

#### Regular consultation with the parent

As an understanding and supportive parental behaviour improves the achievement of learners with learning difficulties to a large extent, keeping regular contact with the parents, of younger learners in particular, is of utmost importance. The meetings could provide forum for exchanging information about the child, where the parents could be given professional advice about how to aid their children's FL learning in the home, and how to relate and respond to their problems.

## **Closing Ideas**

Teaching FLs to students with learning difficulties is a great challenge for all language teachers. Even though these students can be exempted from FL learning classes if their dyslexia is diagnosed, they, just like anyone else, also need to be able to communicate in (a) foreign language(s) in the globalised world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. On top of that, depriving them from the right of learning FLs is totally against the spirit of inclusion. One must not forget about the fact that in every study group on any level of the educational system, from the primary school through college to university, there are on average 2-3 students with learning deficiencies of varying degrees, and most of them are not diagnosed dyslexics, “merely” poor language learners. But if we take this fact into account when selecting our teaching approaches and methods, then not only dyslexic students but those with smaller language processing disorders will also be given the chance to become successful in their FL studies. This will open up endless possibilities for them to study and work abroad, to gather multicultural experiences, and last but not least, to create fruitful human relationships.

This is certainly not an easy undertaking, demanding persistence and commitment from both the learner and the language teacher, but the sense of achievement and success that accrue will compensate and justify the efforts.

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