Students With Learning Disabilities and AD/HD in the Foreign Language Classroom: Supporting Students and Instructors

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Abstract: This article explores why students with learning disabilities and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) struggle with the foreign language curriculum and how their difficulties manifest themselves in the classroom setting. Findings of a three-year, federally funded study that sought to combine expertise in the field of learning disabilities with expertise in the field of language teaching are presented. Discussion includes how accommodations for students with learning disabilities and AD/HD often miss the mark, and which teaching practices have been identified as supporting student learning.

Key words: AD/HD, foreign language learning, learning disabilities, recommended teaching practices

Language: Spanish, relevant to all languages

Introduction
This article describes ways in which students with learning disabilities and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) struggle with the study of foreign language, presents the research findings from a 3-year qualitative study of students
with learning disabilities and AD/HD in the foreign language classroom, and provides a set of classroom practices that has been shown to work particularly well for this population. These practices were investigated at Landmark College, a two-year college that serves students with learning disabilities and AD/HD exclusively. Students must have a diagnosed learning disability or AD/HD to be admitted. All students at the college have experienced significant difficulty with academics and may have struggled with foreign language study in high school or other colleges or universities. In essence, the college provided a model setting for researchers to look closely at the learning process of this population of students, and to determine which teaching practices seemed to effectively support student learning. Out of this study, a number of teaching practices were identified which may prove useful to instructors working with students with learning disabilities and AD/HD, and with other students who are experiencing difficulty.

**LDs and the Challenges for Instructors and Students**

In the past two decades, considerable research, much of it conducted by Sparks and Ganschow, has examined various issues related to why some students seem to struggle inordinately when presented with the task of learning a foreign language in the classroom setting. Various studies (summarized in Ganschow & Sparks, 2000) have led to the determination that the problems of at-risk learners are language based. Their primary areas of breakdown are at the phonological/orthographic level; overall, they have difficulties understanding the rule systems of language. Research conducted at the University of Colorado at Boulder provides further evidence that deficits in the phonological core contribute to poor language aptitude (Downey, Snyder, & Hill, 2000).

Students with learning disabilities are likely to experience problems in a number of language areas, the most critical of which, for beginner language learners, involve phonology, morphology, and syntax (Lerner & Kline, 2006). Weakness in phonology affects a student’s ability to process the sounds of the language. Weakness in morphology results in students having poor appreciation of word roots, tenses, and inflections. Weakness in syntax means that students lack an understanding of grammar and how word order affects meaning.

Students with AD/HD are likely to exhibit difficulties in a number of areas related to executive functioning, such as planning, organizing, maintaining focus, and following through on tasks. Moreover, students with AD/HD typically struggle with tasks that require active working memory (Barkley, 1997). In the foreign language classroom, this often results in uneven focus and problems studying independently and consistently, i.e., doing the key work of building competency through out-of-class practice. While it may be tempting to conclude that students with a dual diagnosis of LD/AD/HD will experience more academic difficulty than those with a diagnosis of LD, this is not necessarily the case (Sparks, Phillips, & Javorsky, 2003). This finding mirrors our experience that while students classified as LD/AD/HD may have a dual diagnosis, the label alone says nothing about the severity or pattern of deficit or about any of the other factors that contribute to a student’s actual in-class performance.

Foreign language learning problems lie along a continuum. While some students will likely experience immediate difficulty in their introductory-level classes, others will not experience difficulty until the intermediate level (Sparks, Ganschow, & Pohlman, 1989). Students with more severe deficits at the phonological level will experience trouble sooner in the curriculum than those whose primary areas of difficulty fall farther along the continuum. As students progress in a typical sequence of language classes, they are expected to remember and manipulate more and more language. Since there are connections between weakness in phonological working
memory and both short-term and long-term language learning (Gathercole & Baddeley, 1993; Service, 1992; Service & Kohonen, 1995), it becomes clear why students struggle to keep pace with their classmates. For all these reasons, students with learning disabilities and/or AD/HD often seem to fall behind and need to catch up. Students with documented learning disabilities and/or AD/HD are certainly not the only students in any given classroom who may be experiencing difficulty. There are likely other students who do not have a diagnosis of LD, AD/HD, or LD/AD/HD who can still be described as at-risk and low-achieving. This means that there are a large number of students who can benefit from the recommended practices outlined in this article.

The Challenge Facing Foreign Language Instructors

Foreign language instructors face a complex challenge. Ofiesh (2007) succinctly described the situation:

The dilemma in accommodating students with LD is that so much of learning a foreign language interacts directly with the characteristics of LD. There are many college courses in which students must strive to find ways to circumvent a disability in order to master content: in the case of foreign language learning, however, the language is the content. Minimal or no cognitive resources are left for scaffolding, or the development of compensatory strategies that might be in place for other academic courses. (p. 240)

To complicate matters, instructors in foreign language programs must have a fairly sophisticated understanding of language-based learning disabilities and AD/HD, and the problems they tend to pose, in order to create environments in which all students can learn. Those who lack experience teaching students with learning disabilities may have difficulty identifying the mismatch between some curriculum, materials, or activities and the learner. McColl (2005) described the task at hand:

Young people need us to set the “do-able” tasks and to be prepared to provide whatever support they need to in order to experience themselves as successful learners. . . . A successful language programme is one that provides learners with progressive challenges that can be met, so that, at whatever level they are working, students can experience success as learners. . . . All too often we language teachers fail to identify with sufficient accuracy the specific difficulties facing some of the learners in our classes. . . . If we don’t understand their difficulties, we may ourselves be erecting barriers for them. (p. 107; emphasis in original)

This is indeed the crux of the matter: Foreign language educators need support understanding the difficulties that students with learning disabilities and AD/HD face in order to create learning experiences that are structured for success and that do not create barriers to learning or unnecessary anxiety for the student.

The Challenge Facing Students With Learning Disabilities

Students with learning disabilities and AD/HD experience a number of problems in foreign language classes, often relating to the connection between their core academic skill deficits (spelling, reading) and related core cognitive deficits (e.g., weak memory, attention, and phonological processing). In spite of their strong cognitive potential, environmental demands are often a poor match for their learning and difficulties. On any given day, instruction may not begin at the student’s point of readiness: What may be “comprehensible input” (Krashen, 1982) for students with strong native language skills may not be for students who have difficulty with language processing. Moreover, students’ underlying difficulties may
not be apparent to the instructor—or perhaps even to the students who received remediation at an early age. For many students, it is precisely at the point that they begin to struggle in the postsecondary foreign language class that the underlying language processing problem is revealed. Thus both students and educators are at a disadvantage as they come to terms with this unexpected difficulty. Students may understandably be reluctant to approach the instructor and unsure how to compensate for their problems (even if they know how to compensate effectively in other subjects).

There is a host of well-documented research on the difficulties faced by students in the foreign language classroom that are caused by weak language processing skills in general and phonological processing in particular (Lerner & Kline, 2006). Students may confuse words that start with the same sound(s) (cuesta, cuenta, ¿cuánto?, ¿cuándo?, quince, quinientos) and struggle to decode written text as well as to pronounce and remember polysyllabic words. Students often lack an intuitive understanding of parts of speech. This makes explanations using grammatical terms difficult for them to understand, whether explained in the first (L1) or the second language (L2).

Another primary cause of difficulties in the foreign language classroom faced by students with learning disabilities and/or AD/HD is the fact that much language instruction and learning relies on students having a strong working memory (instructor talk, videos, listening comprehension exercises). In order to be understood, language must be held “on line” long enough to manipulate it for further use. Anecdotally, Tannock and Martinussen (2001) found that difficulties with verbal working memory are strongly associated with both AD/HD and language-based learning disabilities. For some students, their primary reason for difficulty in learning a foreign language is related to “the more passive aspects of verbal working memory” (Palladino & Cornoldi, 2004, p. 149). Based on her personal experience learning a foreign language while struggling with a learning disability, Simon extrapolated that students are likely to have difficulty holding vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation rules handy to speak with linguistic accuracy in a normal time frame (Simon, 2000). Students find it challenging, for example, to simultaneously retrieve needed vocabulary, conjugate verbs, and think about appropriate word order.

**Recommended Practices for Teaching Foreign Language to Students With Learning Disabilities**

In a fairly recent edition of the *Foreign Language Annals*, DiFino and Lombardino (2004) lamented that foreign language instructors have not “participated in advancing our understanding of the challenges involved in assisting students with learning disabilities who take foreign language classes,” and they suggest that “an enormous void exists . . . particularly with respect to the development of alternative methodologies for facilitating the success of students with learning disabilities in learning an L2” (p. 391). In the experience of the researchers, however, instructors have played and continue to play an important role in the development of methodologies and practices.

Landmark College and the University of Colorado at Boulder, to take just two examples, have run modified foreign language programs for more than a decade. Both programs have been studied extensively, and information about the University of Colorado program is easily accessible (Castro, 2002; Downey & Snyder, 2000, 2001; Downey et al., 2000; Sheppard, 1993). While some information on Landmark College’s program is available (Berberi, Hamilton, & Sutherland, 2008), it is limited, so the researchers herein present information about the Foreign Language Project at Landmark College, conducted by foreign language instructors, which had exactly the aim DiFino and Lombardino desired—developing alternative methodologies for helping students with learning disabilities to learn an L2.
Landmark College Case Study
Research on Effective Classroom Practices

With support from a Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) grant from the U.S. Department of Education, a team of faculty from Landmark College and the School for International Training's M.A.T. program studied the Landmark College foreign language program (Landmark College, 1998, 2000). The team chose Landmark College as the site for this study because of its status as the nation's first postsecondary institution exclusively designed to meet the academic needs of high-achieving students with learning disabilities and AD/HD. In addition, all students submit psychoeducational testing as part of the standard admissions procedure, which makes it an ideal research environment. All students, by the nature of their diagnosis, are at risk for academic failure. Research took place over a three-year period and sought to combine expertise in the field of learning disabilities (provided by faculty from Landmark College) with expertise in the field of language teaching (provided by faculty from the School for International Training's M.A.T. program, which awards degrees with specialties in ESL and foreign language teaching). The goal was to meld the practical knowledge of LDs with the learner-centered, proficiency-oriented teaching practices of the School for International Training and, in the process, document the kind of instruction that could enable students with learning disabilities to succeed in their study of a foreign language (Leons & Herbert, 2002).

The study employed a qualitative research method in which recommended practices were revealed through a data analysis process that gathered information from a wide variety of sources. Specifically, data were collected on students from Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPI) conducted by a certified tester at the beginning and end of every semester of study, learning profiles, learner reflection sheets, student portfolios, videotaped classes, videotaped student interviews, and case studies. Data on the instructor were collected via class observation notes from a team of educators from both the School for International Training and Landmark College faculty, recorded in-depth interviews at the end of each semester, dialog journals, and teacher-created materials for class, as well as handouts for workshops and presentations.

Purpose Statement
This study was conducted in response to the pressing need to provide college foreign language faculty with practical advice for how to reach their at-risk learners in the foreign language classroom. The purpose of the study was to identify practices that would support students identified as LD and/or AD/HD in their learning of a second language.

Definitions
While there a number of definitions of the term learning disabilities, the most recent is the one appearing in the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA-2004) (Public Law 108-446). Learning disabilities, as defined by the federal law and also the basis of most state definitions, is as follows:

The term “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 disorder may manifest itself in imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. Such term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Such term does not include a learning problem, that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities; of mental retardation; of emotional disturbance; or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (Lerner & Kline, 2006, pp. 6–7)
Attention Deficit Disorder
Lerner and Kline (2006) defined attention deficit disorder and AD/HD as follows:

Attention deficit disorder (ADD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a condition of the brain that makes it difficult for children to control their behavior in school and social settings. . . . ADD/ADHD is a chronic neurological condition characterized by: (1) developmentally inappropriate attention skills, (2) impulsivity, and, in some cases, (3) hyperactivity. . . . For a diagnosis of ADD/ADHD symptoms must meet the following criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2000):

1. Severity. The symptoms must be more frequent and severe than are typical of other children at similar developmental levels.
2. Early onset. At least some of the symptoms must have appeared before the child reaches age 7.
3. Duration. The child's symptoms must have persisted for at least six months prior to the diagnosis (Lerner & Kline, 2006, pp. 196–198).

Method
Participants
Over the course of seven semesters from 1996 to 1999, 67 students enrolled in a total of 96 semesters of instruction in first- and second-year Spanish courses were involved in this study, which took place from 1996–1999. All students were studying at the same two-year college, which exclusively serves students with LD and AD/HD. Students were enrolled primarily in Spanish 101 and 102 courses, which make up the first year of Spanish study at the college. A handful of students (8) were enrolled in second-year courses. As mentioned above, all had documented diagnoses of a specific learning disability and/or AD/HD. A diagnosis is required for admission. Students are not assigned to classes based on their diagnoses, so classes were made up of mixed groups. The study of a foreign language was not required for graduation. All students elected to take courses in foreign language.

Data Collection
Learner Reflection Sheets
All students were required to write journal responses to questions about their experiences learning Spanish, particularly that which they considered to be key in helping them to succeed or not. These journals served two critical purposes: First, they assisted students in developing their meta-cognitive skills in the language classroom. Second, they provided information about the kinds of classroom practices that the students considered to be useful to them as well as strategies they needed to employ in order to be successful.

Videotaped Exit Interviews
More than half of the students in the study consented to do a videotaped interview about their experiences studying Spanish. These tapes provided another avenue for analysis of qualitative data generated by students about their previous and current experiences studying a foreign language, their recommendations to instructors and fellow students, and a description of what they felt their learning difference/disability was and how it affected their language study.

Instructor Interviews/Materials
At the end of each semester, the evaluation specialist interviewed the instructors involved in the study about their experiences. In addition, the specialist analyzed the materials developed for various presentations to see how these materials were changing and evolving into clear “best practices” documents.

Oral Proficiency Interviews by an ACTFL-Certified Tester
Students received pre- and post-semester oral proficiency interviews to ascertain their ACTFL level. The tester recorded and analyzed these interviews to determine the score.
Additional information about the ACT-FL OPI and the information provided by the learner reflection sheets is provided here.

**Instrument 1: ACTFL OPI**

The ACTFL OPI takes the form of a carefully structured conversation between a trained and certified interviewer and the person whose speaking proficiency is being assessed. The interview is interactive and continuously adapts to the speaking abilities of the individual being tested. The topics that are discussed during the interview are based on the interests and experiences of the test candidate.

Through a series of personalized questions, the interviewer elicits from the test candidate examples of his or her ability to handle the communication tasks specified for each level of proficiency in order to establish a clear “floor” and “ceiling” of consistent functional ability. Often candidates are asked to take part in a role-play. This task provides the opportunity for linguistic functions not easily elicited through the conversational format.

The ACTFL OPI is currently used worldwide by academic institutions, government agencies, and private corporations for purposes such as: academic placement, student assessment, program evaluation, professional certification, hiring and promotional qualification. (ACTFL, 2008, n.p.)

All students were interviewed face to face, using a five-stage interview process. Stages included a warm-up section, to make the subjects feel comfortable; level checks; role-plays; probes; and a wind-down so that the subjects ended the experience on a positive note. Throughout the process the subjects demonstrated language ability, and the tester worked to find the subjects’ ceiling or highest level of ability of oral proficiency. As a result of the structured interview, subjects were placed at one of nine levels, ranging from Novice Low to Superior.

Although there has been criticism of the instrument’s validity and reliability (Bachman, 1998; Henning, 1992; Johnson, 2000; Tschirner & Heilenman, 1998; Yoffee, 1997), the ACTFL and others indicate that this a reliable and valid instrument (ACTFL, 2008; Halleck, 1992; Huebner & Jensen, 1992; Meredith, 1990). The American Council on Education (ACE) recognizes the OPI and uses it for awarding college credit to students (ACTFL, 2008).

**Testing and Rating Procedure**

ACTFL-certified proficiency testers conducted and rated the ACTFL OPIs. One or more certified testers tape-recorded and rated each interview. For students at the novice level, interviews usually lasted 5–7 minutes; for those at the intermediate level, a typical interview lasted 10–15 minutes. The OPI was scored based on how the speech sample matched the descriptors for functional ability, content, and accuracy. To increase a proficiency level, the candidate had to demonstrate a notable improvement in performance in terms of content, accuracy, and functional tasks. The OPI was conducted within the first week of the semester and then again in the last week of the semester. The procedure/format was the same, but because the test is conducted as a “natural conversation” insomuch as possible, the themes, questions, and the order of the questions vary somewhat. The descriptors measured what the candidate was able to do/to perform in a specific speech sample. The themes/topics varied somewhat but would still fall within the topics for the level.

Researchers collected data for a total of seven semesters. In some cases, students added the course to their schedule too late to be included in a pretest. Others dropped out before the end of the term and thus could not receive a posttest or simply did not show up for the posttest.
Results
The researchers collected 84 sets of usable OPI data. They are represented in Table 1. Those data sets are represented by percentages in Table 2, which indicates that 80% of students enrolled in Spanish 101 increased one or more levels, and 85% of students enrolled in Spanish 102 increased one or more levels of proficiency. The few students enrolled in Spanish 201 and 202 also made gains. Data for the entire group indicate that 79.3% increased one level or more in proficiency as measured by the OPI.

Instrument 2
The Learner Reflection Sheets were designed by course instructors to allow students to comment on the process of learning Spanish. Students completed these sheets four times each semester. The sheets provided the students with the opportunity to comment on what they knew about themselves as learners of Spanish inside and outside of the classroom setting. Fifteen specific questions were provided, and all students enrolled in Spanish classes had the opportunity to write up to the equivalent of two

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Decreased 1 level</th>
<th>No level gain</th>
<th>Increased 1 level</th>
<th>Increased 2 levels</th>
<th>Increased 3 levels</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>101</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>102</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>201</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>202</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
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</table>

### Table 2

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Level</th>
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<th>Increase 1 level</th>
<th>Increase 2 levels</th>
<th>Increase 3 levels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>101</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>24%</td>
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<td>102</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>201</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>202</td>
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<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
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pages in response to one question of their choice. The researchers collected data for four semesters.

**Results**

The researchers collected the Learner Reflection Sheets from 33 students over the course of four semesters. They analyzed the content of the sheets in order to identify classroom practices that students considered to be most useful to them, or strategies that helped them be successful. Students cited “visuals” and “repetition” most frequently as strategies that seemed to work for them. These strategies were followed by “one-on-one teaching” and “multi-modal approach” in terms of popularity of teaching techniques. These and other strategies are summarized in Table 3.

**From Research to Practice**

The research team compared instructor data (as generated through transcribed interviews, handouts created for presentations, and class observation notes) with student data (as generated primarily from transcribed interviews and learner reflection sheets). Cross-referencing of instructor and student data revealed significant overlap, and it was possible to see how the specific techniques mentioned by the students fit into a total approach to teaching foreign language to students with learning disabilities and AD/HD. The following practices were the ones most consistently identified through these various sources.

**Recommended Practices**

1. Make careful curricular choices; be conscious of pace. When students are required to master more information than they can process within a set time frame, they simply fail to learn—and any time invested in the teaching of that material is lost.

2. Build in support for students with weak language processing. As noted in the Introduction, students with weak

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**TABLE 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred Strategies Mentioned by Students on Learner Reflection Sheets by Semester</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N = 33</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 7 6 13 33                                  Fall 1996  Spring 1997  Summer 1997  Fall 1997  Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visuals                                      3 3 16 16 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetition                                   7 2 17 10 36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-on-one teaching                         1 4 13 11 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multimodal teaching                         2 3 12 7 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Games                                        12 1 2 8 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhymes/tapes/songs                           15 0 2 4 21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Language processing are likely to exhibit difficulties in a number of language areas; for beginners, the most critical are phonology, morphology, and syntax.

3. Use multimodal (multisensory) teaching methods. Students with weak memories and language processing abilities benefit from getting information via multiple sensory pathways and multiple formats. A multimodal activity allows a student to process language via a combination of channels or sensory pathways (visual, tactile/kinesthetic, auditory) simultaneously. This approach cushions areas of weakness and allows students to use their stronger modalities.

4. Structure activities for success. Frame activities so that all students can succeed and witness their own learning. Success is a powerful motivator. If teachers can spot the area of breakdown for students, often only minor adjustments in the way they present or support an activity can make it accessible. The goal is to be aware of typical areas of breakdown—to avoid some common problems, and from there, to master the art of making adjustments.

5. Use instructional and assistive technology whenever appropriate. Computer-based practice is ideally suited to students with learning disabilities in a number of ways. They benefit from rapid feedback, the ability to self-pace, and increased opportunity to practice language in ways that are structured and multimodal. Students with learning disabilities especially need ways to study more efficiently and obtain access to the sounds of the language outside of class time.

6. Actively employ learning strategies in the classroom, help students become more strategic, and foster metacognition. Students with learning disabilities need direct instruction in how to go about learning material. As language learning is not a natural area of strength, they cannot afford to be inefficient in their learning. All students, and especially those with learning difficulties, benefit from developing their metacognitive skills, and as language instructors, we are in an excellent position to help them identify their strengths and link specific sets of strategies with specific tasks.

7. Provide one-on-one instruction and give students access to tutors. Individual instruction, either during or outside of class time, can dramatically increase the effectiveness and impact of instruction for students with learning disabilities. Often, just a little extra individualized time can mean the difference between success and failure. Working with a student one-on-one helps the instructor become a better diagnostician, because it makes areas of breakdown easier to identify. Once the instructor locates and analyzes those areas, he or she can alter the instruction to meet a student's needs.

8. Create a supportive in-class environment, encourage student-faculty contact, monitor affective issues, and make language learning fun. A supportive in-class environment can be one of the critical elements for student success. Weaker students often find themselves in uncomfortable situations in foreign language classes. They are asked to perform tasks they may find very difficult to do, in a challenging time frame, in front of the instructor and peers.

More general recommendations from the 1999 FIPSE report included such basic principles for teaching students with learning disabilities as these:

1. Provide a carefully structured class environment rich with routines, organizational support, and road maps such as a detailed syllabus, course calendar, daily agenda, and assignment checklists.

2. Use a diagnostic-prescriptive approach.

3. View each student as an individual.

4. Start instruction at the student's point of readiness.

5. Offer varied means of assessment.
Starting Point for the Future: Some Limitations and Contributions of the Study

Discussion

While the research provided a general measure of student learning and generated a number of practices proven to be successful with students with learning disabilities and/or AD/HD, the findings clearly had some limitations. First, because of the specialized nature of the college in which the study took place, and the fact that the study only took into account the results of primarily one instructor, the study would be difficult to replicate. In addition, because foreign language is not a requirement at the college, it was impossible to track the same group of students through a set number of courses. Second, while the OPI provided one measure of student learning, oral proficiency, other areas of language learning (reading, writing, listening, cultural understanding) were not evaluated. Third, as all students in the study had a history of struggling academically, and the curriculum itself was modified to meet student needs and was therefore a good match, the study had less to offer instructors who struggle with how to meet the needs of gifted and at-risk within the same classroom. More research on universal design as applied to the classroom setting would be useful. Fourth, as the study did not specifically separate students into diagnostic categories, other than to group them as having learning disabilities and/or AD/HD, it provides limited empirical data on which students in various diagnostic categories can be predicted to struggle, although a great deal of qualitative data were generated on the topic. Data on the ages of students and whether or not they had taken Spanish in the past were also not recorded. As the primary areas of difficulty for students in the study tended to fall within the categories of phonological processing, executive functioning, and memory, more research is recommended in these areas.

In spite of these limitations, only a handful of studies are available that document effective teaching practices in the foreign language classroom for students with learning disabilities, AD/HD, and those considered at-risk but who lack an official diagnosis of any kind but may experience similar difficulties. This study begins to point the way toward supporting students who struggle in foreign language classes. Indeed, the findings of this study may apply equally well to all at-risk and/or low-achieving L2 learners.

Implications and Conclusion

The purpose of our study was to investigate effective teaching practices for students with learning disabilities and/or AD/HD enrolled primarily in first- and second-semester Spanish classes. By applying these teaching practices, the instructor saw that a large percentage of students improved measurably in their ability to communicate in an L2: a significant achievement. A much smaller number of students, primarily those with phonological processing problems and memory deficits, experienced great difficulty and made only small gains. However, even so, it was common for these students to report that study of an L2 helped them better understand their L1 as well as another culture. These results provide a starting point for further exploration and above all, implementation of effective practices in the foreign language classroom.

Acknowledgment

This research was funded in part by a FIPSE grant.

References


