

At-Risk Students and the Study of Foreign Language in School

Students who have oral and/or written language learning difficulties in their mother tongue may have problems learning another language in school. This does not mean that they should avoid the study of a new language. With appropriate instruction most students can experience success. The keys to success are the responsibility of both teachers and students. Teachers need to provide appropriate, adapted instruction that meets a particular student's needs. Students need to recognize their learning strengths and weaknesses and stay committed to the task.

Are students who struggle to learn a foreign language usually classified as learning disabled?

No. Many students have difficulties learning a new language system. This does not mean that they are dyslexic or that they have a learning disability. Just as there are some students who have particular strengths in math, science, or any other discipline, some students have particular strengths in learning languages. There is great variability in people's success in studying a foreign language in school settings. Because some students classified as dyslexic or as having learning disabilities (LD) and those not classified as dyslexic or LD generally display similar difficulties and struggles with foreign language, these students are sometimes referred to as *at-risk*.

What is the nature of the foreign language learning difficulties of at-risk learners?

Students who have significant difficulties in one or more of the four language systems in their mother tongue (i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking) may experience problems with foreign language learning in school. The extent of this difficulty in the foreign language classroom is likely to depend on the nature and severity of their oral and written native language problems.

Students who have difficulties in most or all of the four language systems are likely to experience the most problems learning a foreign language, particularly in traditional language classrooms. Language problems can range on a continuum from no difficulties to mild to moderate to severe difficulties. Research findings suggest that there is not a specific disability for learning a foreign language. Rather, the difficulties are an extension of a continuum from very good to very poor language learners.

Why might a regular foreign language class be difficult to pass for at-risk learners?

In general, foreign language teachers are not trained to identify specific learning needs, nor are they trained to provide specific accommodations. Their training may have stressed whole-language-like strategies for in-class learning and testing of the four language areas in the foreign language. Oral communication, language laboratory practice with listening tapes, and computer-assisted learning are currently traditional components of foreign language learning classes. These methods of instruction may serve the ideal learner without language processing problems, but they are often detrimental to the at-risk learner, who may need a more systematic, structured, multisensory approach.

What kinds of problems characterize the foreign language learner with mild to moderate language difficulties?

Some students exhibit mild to moderate language difficulties, such as the following:

- maintaining the pace of the class
- being unable to respond immediately when called upon spontaneously for a response

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- spending more time on foreign language study than other school subjects
- knowing how to study a particular foreign language concept, such as learning new vocabulary or analyzing a grammar or pronunciation rule
- comprehending spoken language, especially when it is spoken quickly
- understanding a language concept and applying it correctly in specific testing situations
- understanding directions when they are given in the foreign language
- producing spelling errors in writing

What additional kinds of problems characterize the foreign language learner with severe language difficulties?

Students who exhibit severe language difficulties may display some or all of the following additional problems:

- learning and remembering the sounds or phonemes of the new language, especially those sounds or phonemes that have little or no resemblance to the native language
- repeating sounds, words, phrases or sentences that are provided by the teacher or through an audiotape or computer
- breaking down words of more than one syllable, such as words with prefixes and suffixes, or compound words
- reading and spelling multisyllabic words
- recognizing common spelling patterns across words
- understanding and applying grammatical rules, such as forming plurals and possessives and using proper word order, especially when these rules are different from the native language
- comprehending spoken language even when it is spoken slowly
- hearing a word and then recognizing it as the same word in writing

What might the foreign language teacher do to assist students with mild to moderate foreign language learning difficulties?

A systematic multisensory structured language (MSL) approach that benefits students who struggle to learn to read and spell in their native language also benefits students who have difficulties learning a foreign language. The following recommendations are based on the key principles of the multisensory approach:

- Provide opportunities for students to practice and review a concept frequently (*repetitive principle*).
- Teach language concepts in a logical progression and help students to categorize concepts; also organize these language concepts from simple to complex (*structured, sequential principles*).
- Build on what students already know, and make the connection between the known and the new information explicit (*cumulative principle*).
- Systematically and explicitly teach the phonemes or speech sounds of the foreign language.
- Directly teach students the sounds of the letters in the foreign language and the letter(s) the sounds represent (*alphabetic/phonetic principle*).
- Show students how to think about a language concept to be learned and ask them to explain the concept in their own words; examples include rules for applying word endings, appropriate word order, and subject/verb agreement (*metacognitive principle*).
- Model for students the way to break apart words while reading, especially words with more than one syllable (*analysis principle*).
- Model for students the way to put parts of words back together for spelling (*synthetic principle*).

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What additional adaptations might the teacher make that will benefit the student with severe language learning difficulties?

Additional ways to enhance foreign language learning success include the following:

- When teaching new sounds or phonemes and symbols, teach only one or two at a time. Emphasize how to use mouth movements to produce clear pronunciations. After pronouncing the sound, have students simultaneously trace, say, and repeat the sound pattern. Repeated, explicit modeling is key, as is clarifying for students the difference between the native and the foreign language pronunciation of the same letter pattern.
 - Conduct a task analysis of the concept to be learned. Break the concept into small working steps that are often considerably more detailed than a typical textbook presentation of the steps. Model for students how to think through the concept step by step. It sometimes helps to present a memorization/recall device, such as a song, mnemonic device, or color-coding (which works well with rules for word endings).
 - Use several learning channels simultaneously (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) to teach a language concept.
 - Use simple visual aids, such as picture clues, whenever possible.
 - Provide structured overviews (study guides, summary sheets, and graphic representations) of the material covered.
 - Provide guided pair work activities to practice and reinforce a concept, pairing a strong student with a weaker student.
 - Use color coding for gender, verb/noun agreement, and other matching principles in the foreign language to highlight a concept.
- Use devices to remember a concept, such as songs with specified grammatical sentence structures, special rhythms, and words in the native language that sound like the word in the foreign language.
 - Explicitly model study and test-taking strategies.
 - Avoid gap-filling exercises, such as vocabulary or grammar worksheets, unless choices of answers are provided.
 - Take time to explain how to read grammatical charts in foreign language textbooks.
 - Provide sufficient time during tests to accommodate students with slow language processing skills.

Do students with foreign language learning difficulties have to study a foreign language in school?

The study of a foreign language is becoming increasingly important in our global economy and multilingual society. Many at-risk students can reap the benefits from the study of a foreign language in the appropriate learning environment.

Unfortunately, such an environment may not be available. In some high schools, colleges, and universities in the United States, another option is to substitute courses on culture for the foreign language requirement. In most cases, to receive accommodations the student must be classified as having a learning disability. Some schools may accept a history of failure in foreign language courses. Schools that offer options generally include a statement in the school's governance document; alternatively, the student might talk to the school's learning assistance specialist.

Suggested Readings/Resources

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The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) thanks Leonore Ganschow, Ed.D., and Elke Schneider, Ph.D., for their assistance in the preparation of this fact sheet.

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Fact sheet revised May 2008.