

ON THE NET

Language Education and Learning Disabilities

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Once upon a time, the brain was considered a muscle and, as such, to be exercised in order to remain healthy and optimally useful. Studying a foreign language (FL) was seen as a useful activity for this purpose; to wit, Latin and Greek were the sit-ups and push-ups of the mind. For a long time, language study consisted primarily of parsing and dissecting grammar; any practical use was secondary and thought to follow from an intellectual knowledge of the formal analysis of the language (Kelly, 1969; Thomas, 1995). Because literacy in general and language study in particular were options open to only a small segment of the populace, an elitism surrounding foreign languages was born during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and maintained even until recently in our schools. Language study was viewed for years as the province of a select portion of students: parents were notified that their child had been "selected" to begin a second language earlier than their peers, and only those students considered "college bound" were encouraged or even permitted to take a FL. Indeed, many of us FL educators ourselves were guilty of perpetuating this elitist myth about FL study and secretly counted ourselves lucky that we did not have to deal with such problems as the general school populace typically brought to the classroom.

Slowly but surely, we FL teachers began to realize that not only was this elitist stance archaic and fallacious in light of modern learning theory, it was also detrimental to the students in our schools and to the FL profession as a whole (Grittner, 1973). First, we have come to realize and acknowledge that all students **can** learn other languages. Second, we maintain that they **should** learn FLs in order to be fully functional in the global society that is their future. Third, maintaining an elitist attitude about FL offerings has led to hard times and low enrollments for FL professionals and may even lead to extinction for some study. Happily, most students now can take a foreign language at some point in their public school career, and they are being encouraged to do so in greater numbers than in the past. Students also are beginning to see the relevance of FLs in their lives, certainly in terms of the workplace and their own marketability and even as a valuable goal of lifelong learning.

The result of this increased interest in and accessibility of FL study, coupled with the current educational policy of inclusion, has radically changed the profile of the student population in our classrooms. We are seeing special needs children in increasing numbers, yet most FL teachers are ill-prepared to fulfill those needs. While they may have received some instruction in attending to diverse learning styles, most preservice FL teacher curricula provide little or no preparation in the area of special education. Inservice FL teachers are in the same boat; even those who remain current with the literature in the field can find little research to guide their classroom practice in this area. The research that does exist is not necessarily consonant, one major issue being the definition of terminology and identification of the needs of the students concerned (cf, Mabbott, 1994, 1995; Sparks, Ganschow, & Javorsky, 1995a, 1995b). Consequently, FL teachers are urgently seeking assistance and guides to resources that will enable them to work with this new and challenging student population.

Sonja Moore of Virginia Commonwealth University has created a web page on the Internet that brings together a host of resources and information for FL teachers searching for assistance in dealing with students and their special needs. Her site, [The Foreign Language Teacher's Guide to Learning Disabilities](#)

The Instant Access Treasure Chest

The Foreign Language Teacher's Guide to Learning Disabilities

includes a wealth of information, from basic definitions of disability terms to interactive links to journal articles addressing the educational requirements of special needs students to legal information necessary for those who deal with inclusionary educational systems. This column will review Professor Moore's web page in general and highlight the major features of her site as a reference guide to FL teachers looking for information on the timely and important topic of teaching FL students with special needs. A quick glance at the table of contents for the page indicates the breadth of topics covered.

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[Attention Deficit Disorder](#)
[Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder](#)
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[College Policies for Students with Disabilities](#)
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These topics are annotated below, with subsumed links of particular interest being noted. An additional feature of the page is a section entitled [Conference Handouts](#), offering a series of one-page explanatory or reference materials ready to be used by teachers.

Assistive Technology

As technology becomes more readily available in the classroom, it can play a role in helping students to improve their performance. The "Assistive Technology" section includes links to journals specializing in assistive technology (AT) for disabled persons, an ERIC Digest dealing with AT for people with mild disabilities, IBM and Macintosh commercial sites focusing on AT, and links to entire Internet lessons on AT.

Visual Deficits

Auditory Deficits

Both the "Visual Deficits" and "Auditory Deficits" areas lead us to other web resources for people with these specific disabilities, singularly or in combination. Among these links are those to the DeafWorld server, other WWW resources for the deaf, and the Michigan State University Deaf Gopher. Additional resources are ERIC documents on these disabilities, recordings for the blind and dyslexic, and an article on how to work with blind or visually impaired people in general.

[Attention Deficit Disorder](#)

[Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder](#)

Teachers have become more and more aware of the role of "Attention Deficit Disorder" (ADD) and "Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder"(ADHD) in the behavior of some students. Essential resources for these problems include several ERIC Digests, definitions of ADD and ADHD, an ADD WWW archive, several articles dealing with both children and adults with these disabilities that are descriptive and prescriptive in nature, and articles directly related to classroom teaching of students with ADD and ADHD. An ADD electronic newsletter helps stay on top of current information.

[Dyslexia](#)

FL teachers are often very aware of "Dyslexia" because we tend to be more familiar with the symptoms. Links here include a gopher bibliography, a WWW archive, ERIC Digests, and an article on language-based learning disabilities and dyslexia.

[Hyperlexia](#)

Resources for "Hyperlexia" contain an article that defines and explains Hyperlexia and also a link to the American Hyperlexia Association home page.

[Learning Styles](#)

Once we know more about some of the learning disabilities that we might encounter, the next step is to figure out how we can help. A "Learning Styles" section has several ERIC digests on learning styles in general and one in particular on second language learning styles and strategies. We also find an article that discusses several different types of learning-style instruments.

[Foreign Language and LD](#)

For more specific ideas about how these learning disabilities impact on the FL classroom, we find a section of "Foreign Language and LD" links. FL teachers should find this section especially useful. There are six ERIC Digests dealing directly with FL learning, learning styles, and disabilities. Also archived here is an article entitled "Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act: Accommodating the Learning Disabled Student in the Foreign Language Curriculum."

[Teaching Students with Disabilities](#)

A companion to the section above is another on "Teaching Students with Disabilities." Though not language-specific, it includes several ERIC Digests, general guides and links to special education resources, as well as an annotated bibliography on teaching students with LD.

Other useful links are:

[College Policies for Students](#)

[Legal Information](#)

[Some Common Questions and Answers](#)

While availing oneself of all the material available here is no substitute for professional education in the area of special needs students in the foreign language classroom or consultation with trained specialists, it is a welcome point of departure for the many FL professionals who are facing this instructional demand with little or no background. Sonja Moore has provided the profession with a valuable resource in this page, and her efforts are to be commended.

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