JIMALEE SOWELL AND LARRY SUGISAKI
United States

Accommodating Learning Disabilities in the English Language Classroom

It is estimated that ten percent of learners have some sort of learning disability; on average, this is two or three students per classroom (Butterworth and Kovas 2013). This means that, inevitably, all English language instructors will encounter students with learning disabilities in their classrooms and could encounter students with learning disabilities in each class. In 2018, we, the authors of this article, conducted a pilot study on learning-disability training for English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers. All the participants in our study had previously taught or were currently teaching English in EFL contexts. The majority of respondents in our survey (83 percent) indicated they were not confident about their abilities to assist students with learning disabilities. Among the study participants who had received training, the majority (52 percent) indicated their training had been relatively brief—lasting a day or less (Sowell and Sugisaki 2020). This article is a response to the need to provide more information about learning disabilities to English language teachers.

Learning disabilities are complex, and learning how to accommodate them is an ongoing process. We are not experts on learning disabilities. We are, first and foremost, English language instructors who, through our own experiences in various classrooms at various schools, recognize a lack of training and support for assisting English language learners with learning disabilities. We believe it is important to continually advance our knowledge of learning disabilities and effective accommodations as a part of our professional practice.

The purpose of this article is to provide English language instructors with basic tools for helping English language learners with learning disabilities succeed in the English language classroom. The article first provides a definition of learning disabilities and the complexity in determining whether certain difficulties are the result of a learning disability or struggles with language acquisition. It then outlines the following methods of instruction that help support students with learning disabilities: (1) the Inclusive Classroom, (2) Universal Design for Learning (UDL), (3) Scaffolding, and (4) Peer-assisted Learning Strategies (PALS). The References and Additional Resources sections provide an extensive list of useful resources on learning disabilities.

DEFINING LEARNING DISABILITIES

Historically, there has been a degree of difficulty in defining learning disabilities, and a concrete shared definition has yet to be agreed upon; however, as a broad conceptual construct, learning disabilities can be understood as "unexpected underachievement," where "the severity of underachievement . . . is unexpected because the individual has not responded adequately to instruction that is effective for most individuals" (Fletcher et al. 2019, 4). Under the broad umbrella of underachievement, Burr, Haas, and Ferriere (2015, 3) specifically define learning disability as "a neurological condition that interferes with an individual's ability to store, process, or produce information. Learning disabilities can affect a student's ability to read, write, speak, spell, compute math, or reason as well as a student's attention, memory, coordination, social skills, and emotional maturity." All learning disabilities are characterized by marked difficulty in at least one area of academic performance. Challenges with literacy skills make up the most common form of learning disability (Klingner and Eppolito 2014). Other factors that could manifest as scholastic underperformance should be eliminated. The Learning Disabilities Association of America (2020) states that "learning disabilities should not be confused with learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps; of intellectual disability; of emotional disturbance; or of environmental, cultural or economic disadvantages."

THE DIFFICULTY OF IDENTIFYING LEARNING DISABILITIES IN THE CLASSROOM

Identifying learning disabilities is a complex endeavor, but it becomes even more challenging in the English language classroom. A student's struggles in English are sometimes misidentified as a learning disability when they are, in fact, the result of other causes (Abedi 2006; Artiles and Ortiz 2002; Artiles et al. 2005; McCardle et al. 2005; Shore and Sabatini 2009). Some English language learners have been misdiagnosed with a learning disability when their scholastic underperformance is the result of not having had an adequate opportunity to develop language and literacy skills (Farnsworth 2018; Klingner and Eppolito 2014). Many factors outside of a learning disability, such as hunger, illness, and inadequate educational support at home, can interfere with a student's ability to learn (Bulat et al. 2017).

Determining whether a student has a learning disability or a language-learning difficulty can be difficult because both challenges often present with similar characteristics (Case and Taylor 2005; Chu and Flores 2011; Hoover, Baca, and Klingner 2016; Klingner 2009; Klingner and Eppolito 2014). Some common shared behaviors in learning disabilities and second-language (L2) acquisition are (1) difficulty following directions, (2) poor auditory memory, (3) difficulty concentrating, (4) challenges in processing difficult language, and (5) a tendency to become quickly frustrated (Klingner and Eppolito 2014). Klingner and Eppolito (2014) have noted some differences in features of learning disabilities and L2 acquisition difficulties. For instance, a student with a learning disability might have difficulty with phonological awareness, while an L2 learner might have difficulty distinguishing between sounds not in the first language (L1). A student with a learning disability might have difficulty remembering sight words, while an L2 learner might struggle to remember sight words for words they do not understand. Researchers have recently been giving more attention to learning disabilities in the language classroom, but to date, not much is known about learning disabilities among L2 learners (Klingner, Artiles, and Méndez Barletta 2006; Shore and Sabatini 2009).

WHAT WE CAN DO IN THE ABSENCE OF A SUPPORT TEAM

One respondent in our research survey reported that they did not feel comfortable diagnosing a student with a learning disability for fear of misdiagnosis. We understand this hesitation and agree that it is important to be cautious in how we approach learning

disabilities. In most cases, in order to make an accurate diagnosis of a learning disorder, a multiple analysis should be carried out with a team of specialists (Farnsworth 2018; Lesaux and Harris 2013). However, in many contexts, a support team of specialists does not exist. There are some methods, though, that can be useful in determining the possible existence of a learning disorder, even in the absence of a team of specialists.

First of all, the instructor needs to honestly evaluate the progress of the entire class, carefully considering whether instruction is culturally, pedagogically, and linguistically appropriate in meeting the needs of all learners (Farnsworth 2018). If most students are struggling with a given task or subject area, then the problem is usually with the instruction and not the students. If, on the other hand, most students are doing well, and only a few students are having problems, the instructor needs to closely evaluate the struggling students and offer additional help as needed (Klingner 2009). Unusual difficulty or struggle in the L1 can also be a potential indicator of a learning disability (Farnsworth 2018; Klingner and Eppolito 2014).

Common indicators of a learning disability are (1) difficulty following directions, (2) difficulty concentrating, (3) challenges in understanding social situations, and (4) difficulty interpreting facial expression (Farnsworth 2018). See National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) (2018) for information on signs and symptoms of learning disabilities.

WHAT ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS CAN DO

Although English language teachers in many contexts might never become experts on learning disabilities, they can accommodate students with learning disabilities in their classes by implementing teaching approaches that are good for all students, with or without learning disabilities. In other words, the accommodation is in the planning and instruction for all learners, which allows teachers to help students with learning disabilities. In the next section, we present four practical methods for helping students with learning disabilities. We start with the Inclusive Classroom and UDL; while the Inclusive Classroom offers specific strategies, UDL is an overall framework for instruction. This is followed by scaffolding and the PALS technique for reading.

THE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM

As Dolmage (2008, 17) has pointed out, "There is no perfect body or mind. And there is no normal body or mind." An inclusive classroom is one that is designed to meet the learning needs of all students, including students with disabilities or other learning challenges (Bulat et al. 2017).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2005) outlines inclusive education as including the following principles:

- Inclusion is a process.
- Inclusion is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers.
- Inclusion is about the presence, participation and achievement of all students.
- Inclusion involves a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalization, exclusion or underachievement. (UNESCO 2005, 15–16)

Research has shown that the best way to instruct students with mild or high-incidence disabilities is to place them in regular classrooms rather than in segregated schools or special classes for students with disabilities (Bulat et al. 2017; Cole, Waldron, and Majd 2004; Rapp and Arndt 2012). Students with disabilities learn better and develop better social skills in inclusive classrooms than in segregated classrooms; including students with disabilities in regular classrooms also has a positive effect on students without disabilities (Ferguson, Desjarlais, and Meyer 2000). In an inclusive classroom, students

with varied abilities learn to interact with one another, an important part of learning to be inclusive. Because the Inclusive Classroom includes all learners, no specialized disability testing or identification beyond what teachers might normally do is required (Bulat et al. 2017), although some students with severe disabilities might need more specialized and individualized care than can be carried out in a mainstream class (Rapp and Arndt 2012).

Strategies for the Inclusive Classroom

1. Use guided note-taking

Many students benefit from taking notes, a practice that helps learners remember key concepts; having notes to refer to later reinforces retention. Guided note-taking helps learners focus on certain ideas or key points in a listening passage, reading passage, or instructor's lecture, which results in better comprehension for students with or without disabilities (Chi and Wylie 2014; Schwartz and Gurung 2012). To conduct a guided note-taking activity, give your students specific points or a set of questions to answer as they listen or read, as in Table 1.

2. Make students aware of the daily schedule

Many students, including those with intellectual disabilities, perform better if they are made aware of the daily schedule for a class period or the entire school day (Bulat et al. 2017). You can make students aware of the daily schedule by writing it on the board or a flip chart posted at a visible place in the room. Marking off tasks as they are completed gives students a sense of accomplishment.

3. Attend to student fatigue

Allow students enough time to master the material. Students with learning disabilities might need more time than other students to complete some tasks. Provide plenty of breaks throughout the day or class period and vary task types in a lesson and across the curriculum. Incorporate activities with movement into your lessons. (See McCaughey [2018] for ways to incorporate movement into your lessons.)

4. Provide systematic instruction

For each lesson, start by providing the objective(s) of the lesson, a brief overview of the lesson, and the tasks or exercises students will be expected to engage in or complete. If the lesson is about learning to write a formal email, for example, the teacher would start by stating that as the objective. The teacher then explains that the lesson will focus on understanding when a formal email is needed and the different components of a formal email. Next, the teacher lets students know that the lesson will end with each student writing a formal email.

5. Provide explicit instruction

Many students need explicit instruction to understand new concepts. A teacher should

Example A: Specific Points	
Advantages of living in the city	**Disadvantages of living in the city**
Example B: Questions and Answers	
Questions	**Answers**
1. What is media literacy?	
2. Why is media literacy important?	
3. How can media literacy skills be developed?	

Table 1. Example of guided note-taking activities

not assume that a new concept will be learned unless it is explicitly and directly taught. For instance, a teacher cannot assume that students will automatically acquire a new grammar point just by listening to or reading a passage with the new grammar point. Input through a reading or listening passage is a good way to introduce a new grammar point, but the teacher should then move to explicit instruction.

6. Institute activity-based learning

Most students do not learn well when they are exposed only to teacher talk; they need to actively engage in applying new concepts. This application of learning can take place in many ways. For instance, it might be carried out through a speaking task, a writing task, or a presentation on a relevant topic. For example, after listening to a passage about daily routines, students could write down their own daily routines and then explain their routine to a partner, who fills in a chart while listening.

UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING (UDL)

The concept of UDL in education is based on the architectural concept of Universal Design, in which spaces are built to be as accessible as possible by everyone, regardless of disability, age, or any other factors. The purpose of UDL is to address the variability of all learners—with or without any kind of disability—and meet their needs (Rapp 2014). Students vary in what they perceive and how they learn, and in their interests and motivations. A curriculum designed for the average student typically excludes more students than it includes. UDL follows a set of principles to use when designing curriculum so that all learners have an equal opportunity to learn. UDL does not have a specified template or rigid rules to follow; rather, it utilizes varied and flexible strategies in order to meet the needs of all learners (Dolmage 2015).

In the original framework of UDL, the three principles are to provide the following:

1. multiple means of engagement
2. multiple means of representation
3. multiple means of action and expression (Rose and Meyer 2002).

1. Provide multiple means of engagement

This principle indicates that learners are engaged differently by different tasks and learning situations (Rapp 2014). There is no one optimal learning task that will equally engage all learners. For instance, some learners like group work and collaboration, while others prefer to work alone. Some learners might enjoy projects with loose guidelines and a lot of freedom, while others prefer assignments with structured guidelines. To address the diversity among learners and to engage and motivate them, aim to utilize different methods of engagement throughout your course.

Providing multiple means of engagement includes planning lessons with a variety of interactional patterns such as pair work, group work, whole-class work, and individual work as well as classroom tasks that offer different activities, such as interactive sessions and individual study time. To physically engage learners with one another, have them arrange their desks in a half circle so they can see one another. You cannot expect that all learners will be equally engaged in every task, but by having a variety of engagement techniques, you are more likely to meet the needs of all learners.

2. Provide multiple means of representation

Learners differ in how they perceive and comprehend information. Rapp and Arndt (2012) refer to methods and materials through which students perceive information as input. When input is presented in only one way, the method of presentation favors learners with the ability to access the material through the presented method and marginalizes others. For instance, information that is delivered only by speech favors auditory learners. There is a much greater chance of reaching all learners when input is provided in multiple forms.

In a language class, for instance, instead of only reading a dialogue in the target language, learners might also listen to the dialogue and present it in the form of a role play. They might also see pictures of new vocabulary contained in the dialogue and write new words in a vocabulary notebook, perhaps adding definitions or simple drawings. In addition, presenting new information in multiple forms increases the chances that the information will be remembered, as it allows learners the chance to access the same information on multiple occasions. There is no one optimal way of presenting new information to all learners, so it should be represented through multiple means (Rapp 2014).

3. Provide multiple means of action and expression

Learners approach tasks differently and express what they know in different ways. For instance, some learners might be better at written expression than speech, and vice versa. The most common methods of output in classrooms typically comprise written production (for example, tests, worksheets, and writing assignments) or in-class responses to teacher-led questions (Rapp 2014). While these methods of output are suitable for some learners, they do not sufficiently account for the learning of all students; some learners may not be able to successfully demonstrate their learning through traditional methods of output. Providing students with multiple choices for output can greatly improve learning (Rapp 2014).

For instance, instructors can allow students to choose among several assignments. Instead of requiring all students to write a research report on a certain topic, for example, instructors can allow students to choose among various tasks, such as writing a research report, creating a podcast, and compiling a photo essay. Another method is to allow students to choose among a set of assignments. For example, when designing your course, you can give students a number of assignments to choose from. Students are then required to complete a certain number of those assignments, four out of five, for instance, so that learners have some choice in their methods of output.

4. Provide multiple means of assessment

To add to the three principles of the original UDL framework, Rapp and Arndt (2012) suggest a fourth principle: Provide multiple means of assessment. In keeping with the three primary principles of UDL, evaluation of student learning should also be carried out using a variety of assessment methods, using formative and summative assessments and alternative assessments (Rapp 2014). Summative assessment is assessment of learning. It is used to evaluate a student's learning at the end of a unit, course, or program. Formative assessment, on the other hand, is assessment for learning. Formative assessment helps learners know how they can improve and does not result in a grade. Courses should be designed so that students receive feedback and formative assessment regularly throughout the semester. Lengthy or multi-component assignments should be divided into sizeable chunks that provide formative assessment at regular intervals. Alternative assessments, such as portfolios or project work, show student achievement over time and on a variety of tasks.

SCAFFOLDING

Scaffolding is an instructional technique in which a teacher, assistant, or more capable peer temporarily assists learners to complete a certain task successfully so that they will later be able to complete the task alone. However, scaffolding does not simply mean helping; scaffolding techniques should be designed so that learners can develop full competence in a task that they can later carry out independently (Gibbons 2015). In scaffolded instruction, the teacher guides the learner through a step-by-step process from the start to the completion of a task.

In a scaffolded lesson on writing a paragraph, for example, the instructor begins by helping learners brainstorm ideas for a topic. Following the brainstorming session, students draft

a paragraph. Afterwards, students receive some kind of feedback on their draft. Then students revise and later edit their paragraphs. In a non-scaffolded lesson, on the contrary, the teacher might just tell students to write a paragraph. The teacher might be able to give a non-scaffolded paragraph assignment after having gone through the scaffolded version a certain number of times; in other words, through completing the task several times, students would move from novice to competent achiever. Scaffolding has appeared to be a successful technique with English language learners with learning disabilities and is useful in a class of English language learners with and without learning disabilities (Santamaria, Fletcher, and Bos 2002).

PEER-ASSISTED LEARNING STRATEGIES (PALS)

PALS is a class-wide peer-tutoring reading program in which a higher-performing student is paired with a lower-performing student to carry out reading activities. Research has shown that PALS has improved the reading ability of students of all performance levels, from low to high, including students with learning disabilities (Fuchs, Fuchs, et al. 1997; Fuchs, Fuchs, Thompson, et al. 2001; Sáenz, Fuchs, and Fuchs 2005; Simmons et al. 1995). Colón's (2016) research shows that English language learners with and without disabilities were able to improve their oral reading fluency and accuracy over the control group following a number of PALS sessions. It is often best to pair students in a clandestine manner so that no student feels singled out. You can have students change partners periodically throughout the semester or course, every four or five weeks. Teachers should choose appropriate reading materials for students, depending on their reading level. Readings from the textbook or other course materials can be used for PALS activities.

During PALS activities, students take turns with the roles of Coach and Reader. The higher-performing student should take the role of Reader first so that the less-proficient reader has a chance to preview the text and to hear it read aloud once before reading it. After five minutes of reading, students reverse roles, and the new Reader rereads the same passage while the new Coach provides feedback. The three core activities of PALS are partner reading, paragraph shrinking, and prediction relay, as follows:

1. Partner reading

As the Reader reads aloud, the Coach provides corrective feedback, helping with words that the Reader needs support with.

2. Paragraph shrinking

The Reader gives the main idea, provides a short summary of the reading passage (one or two sentences), and gives a recap of the most important details in the passage.

3. Prediction relay

Before reading, the Reader makes predictions about what is likely to happen in the next part of the reading passage (this can be a page, a paragraph, or a section of text). After reading the given block of text, the Reader gives a short summary of the just-read text. The Coach determines whether the predictions that had been made before reading were accurate.

CONCLUSION

This article is meant, first and foremost, to bring attention to learners with learning disabilities in the English language classroom. At some point, all English language teachers have worked with or will work with learners with learning disabilities. While we as English language teachers may not become experts on learning disabilities, we can have a better understanding of them. Second, the article provides practical suggestions for accommodating English language learners with and without disabilities in the same classroom. This article is a point from which teachers can start their work. The References and Additional Resources sections provide a number of useful resources for understanding and accommodating learning disabilities; many specifically focus on L2 learners.

We stated at the beginning of the article that, as English language teachers, we should all be committed to finding ways to help learners in our own classrooms who might have learning disabilities. As our research has shown, most English language instructors have had limited or no training at all in accommodating students with learning disabilities (Sowell and Sugisaki 2020). It is our hope that through our research and writing, more English language instructors will be able to improve their understanding of learning disabilities in the English language classroom and find ways to accommodate students' needs so that they can succeed academically.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For understanding and identifying learning disabilities, and developing and implementing effective techniques and environments for L2 acquisition, we recommend readers consult several resources cited in the text—Burr, Haas, and Ferriere (2015); Fletcher et al. (2019); Hoover, Baca, and Klingner (2016); Klingner and Eppolito (2014); Learning Disabilities Association of America (2020); Rapp (2014); and Rapp and Arndt (2012)—as well as the additional resources listed below.

Books

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Haas, E. M., and J. E. Brown. 2019. *Supporting English learners in the classroom: Best practices for distinguishing language acquisition from learning disabilities*. New York: Teachers College Press. (An important guide in learning to differentiate between learning disabilities and language acquisition)

Online Resources

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Jimalee Sowell is a PhD candidate in Composition and Applied Linguistics at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. She has served as an English Language Fellow and an English Language Specialist. Her research interests include disability studies, teaching writing, peace education, genre analysis, large class pedagogy, and teacher education.

Larry Sugisaki is a PhD student in Composition and Applied Linguistics at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He has worked as a university English professor as well as an English language teacher in Japan. His research interests include disability studies, translingualism, and writing-center studies.