

Language learning and students with special educational needs

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Why is it important for learners with special educational needs to learn languages?

When addressing this question, we need to carefully consider the purpose of language learning. Rather than focussing on language proficiency, we should recognise the broader benefits of language learning and appreciate that, even those who are unlikely to reach a high level of competence, will gain from exposure to a new language and culture. In September 2004, Terry Davis, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, described language learning as:

"... a powerful tool for building tolerant, peaceful and inclusive multicultural societies. The experience of learning a new language helps to develop openness to other cultures and acceptance of different ways of life and beliefs. It raises awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity and promotes tolerance of people with a different lifestyle." www.languageswithoutlimits.co.uk/Resources/SfLArticle.pdf

In "Modern Languages for All", Hilary McColl (2000) discusses whether all children can gain from language learning. She mentions some of the accepted benefits of language learning and then points out that there may also be unpredictable benefits. She cites the student who had struggled to learn the days of the week in English but achieved this after successfully learning them in French and the student who only mastered telling the time in English after learning it in French.

In today's increasingly multicultural and multilingual world, learning languages is a right and should be available to everyone, whether or not they have special educational needs. There is significant evidence that language learning can be a stimulating experience for learners with special educational needs. The opportunity to be exposed to a new language and a different culture leads to a richer and broader education. In some cases, learners may become quite proficient at the language learning itself – for example, pupils with Asperger's Syndrome have been found to be less inhibited when working in a foreign language and their good rote memory is conducive to the learning of vocabulary.

In other cases, the experience of learning a language may have wider beneficial effects. Autistic students are able to benefit from exposure to a different culture and language learning is believed to improve their interaction and communication skills. Foreign language learners with emotional, social and behavioural educational needs have found to develop improved social skills and sensitivity through engaging in language learning. [[Special Educational Needs in Europe, The teaching and learning of languages](#) (2005)]

What are the challenges?

In the past, there has been a tendency to assume that learners with special educational needs will be unable to benefit from the teaching of a foreign language. It is essential that low expectations are challenged and that learners are given the opportunity to embark on a new language. Teachers need to have the training, confidence and expertise to be able to respond to the diverse language learning needs and styles represented in their classroom. They need to have an understanding of learners' difficulties and to be able to develop an enabling environment in which the learners will be able to demonstrate successful learning. So, in the case of dyslexic learners, there are likely to be difficulties with, for example, phonological processing, short-term and working memory, speed of processing and word-finding. These will need to be addressed through the use of explicit, structured multisensory teaching where elements are presented in manageable

chunks with lots of opportunities for overlearning. These accommodations not only increase the likelihood of success for dyslexic learners but are in fact effective teaching strategies for all learners.

It should also be recognised that language learning, like so many other areas of the curriculum, is beneficial in itself. A child should not be denied the opportunity to engage in language learning just because they are unlikely to reach national assessment standards. It is likely that the vast majority of learners can benefit from language learning if it is presented in a meaningful and accessible context at an appropriate pace and with suitable learning activities and targets.

It is also worth mentioning that some languages may be more challenging than others. Schools often offer French but French, like English, is a relatively opaque language. This means that it does not have clear letter-sound correspondence and has more irregularities than a language such as Spanish. Languages with a shallow orthography may be more accessible for dyslexic learners who may be encouraged to find that not all languages pose the same problems as English. Motivation should also be taken into account. A learner who knows that (s)he is going to visit a country and have the opportunity to encounter the language is likely to be more motivated than the learner who is unlikely to come across the language outside of the classroom.

What are the benefits?

Module 1 of the [Dyslang course](#) suggests that because of the inseparable relationship between language and culture, the language classroom provides an ideal context for the development of intercultural competence. This involves:

“different cognitive and behavioural skills: not only knowledge about the diverse aspects of different cultures, but also an attitude of openness, curiosity, respect towards those cultures, the capacity to adapt to different ways of thinking, the willingness to negotiate meanings in the different languages and to try and find a sort of “common ground” for an effective interaction, without allowing one cultural system to prevail over the other(s).” (2013, p22)

The module goes on to consider a range of fun, often multisensory activities which involve oral interaction with peers and which increase students’ knowledge about different cultures, develop their ability to look at issues from different perspectives and encourage cooperation and exchange among students.

Module 4 of Dyslang suggests teaching approaches that may be effective in improving language skills and in developing wider skills. For example, Cooperative Learning attaches great importance to student-student relationships and enables learners to learn from each other, to acquire different and wider viewpoints, share feelings, ideas, concerns and aspirations, and improve self-perception.

Conclusion

The Executive Summary (2005) of a European Commission document on Special Educational Needs and language learning stated that:

“All young people in the European Union, whatever their disability, whether educated in mainstream or segregated schools/streams, have equal rights to foreign languages education”.

www.languageswithoutlimits.co.uk/Resources/EUextracts.pdf

Taking into account the cognitive and social benefits that come with language learning, we would be doing children with learning difficulties a great disservice to deny them the opportunity to acquire some of those benefits too.