

## **Foreign Language Requirements And Students With Learning Disabilities**

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At the April 1992 Foreign Language Learning and Learning Disabilities Conference held at the American University in Washington, DC, the following issues emerged related to the dilemma of foreign language requirements for college students with learning disabilities.

- Recent findings show that students with learning disabilities have basic native language difficulties--written and/or oral, receptive and/or expressive (Sparks & Ganschow, 1991).
- Increasing numbers of students with identified learning disabilities are now entering U.S. colleges and universities.
- Expectations are emerging across the country for students to study a foreign language in elementary, junior high, or high school.
- More and more colleges and universities expect proficiency in a foreign language upon college entry or prior to college graduation.
- Recent findings show that most students with learning disabilities have inordinate difficulties in foreign language classes.

Many students and professionals question the reasonableness of foreign language requirements for students with learning disabilities. However, according to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, colleges and universities are not obligated to waive foreign language requirements for students with learning disabilities, nor are they required to provide course substitutions. Thus, colleges and universities that do provide waivers or substitutions do so on a voluntary basis.

### **Waivers And Course Substitutions**

To gather information on the provision of waivers and course substitutions, Ganschow, Sparks, and Miller surveyed colleges and universities that provide support services for students with learning disabilities (Ganschow, Myer, & Roeger, 1989; Ganschow, Sparks, & Miller, 1992). Of the 166 colleges and universities that responded to the 1987 survey, 30% required some number of years of foreign language study as a pre university entrance requirement, and 78% required some number of years of foreign language as a requirement for graduation in at least one program area. Only 6% of the colleges and universities that responded stated that they allowed students with learning disabilities to waive the foreign language requirement; another 6% offered the student a choice between a waiver and a course substitution; 24% had no standard procedure; and the rest provided substitutions.

The survey also yielded information on the types of courses that colleges and universities offer as substitutions for foreign language study. Foreign culture and civilization courses were mentioned by 81% of the survey respondents; foreign language courses taught in English were mentioned by 25%; and sign language classes were mentioned by 25%. (For information about foreign language course substitution and waiver procedures, see Philips, Ganschow, & Anderson, 1991.)

### **Alternatives To Waivers And Course Substitutions**

*Accommodative Services.* Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, colleges and universities that receive federal financial assistance are required to provide accommodative services to students with disabilities. Accommodative services are services that help to ensure that all components of an academic program (such as foreign language courses) are accessible to students with disabilities. A student must first be identified as having a disability and provide the Office of Disability Support Services (ODSS) with appropriate documentation of the disability. Then, appropriate aids or services can be selected in consultation with the student. Examples of accommodative services that students with learning disabilities may be able to benefit from in foreign language courses include notetakers; extra time to complete examinations; permitting examinations to be read orally, dictated, or typed; and alternate test formats.

Many colleges and universities now go "above and beyond" the letter of the law and have established separate and distinct programs for students with learning disabilities. Such programs offer services that go beyond the Section 504 requirement of making an academic program accessible. Examples of such services include tutoring by a learning disabilities specialist, basic skills remediation, and special skill development courses. For information on such programs, see Kravets & Max, 1991; Lipkin, 1991; and Mangrum & Strichart, 1992.

*A Modified Latin Program for Students with Learning Disabilities.* Another alternative is to modify an existing foreign language program to meet the special needs of students with learning disabilities. The University of Colorado at Boulder offers an experimental "controlled environment" foreign language program for students with learning disabilities. Latin was chosen as the focus by program creator Dr. Doris Downey, because it is non-oral/non-auditory and because the grammar can be limited.

The program covers three semesters, the first two of which involve courses in a controlled environment; that is, the courses are designed for and are only open to students with learning disabilities. Instruction in these courses is modified to accommodate the students' needs: New materials are introduced at a slower pace, there is reduced reading, and each class has a predictable structure. Planned repetition and review are incorporated into each class period, and students are given an unlimited amount of time on tests.

In the third semester, students from the previously modified program are joined in a Caesar translation class by students who have been taking the regularly offered Latin classes. At this level, modifications for the students with learning disabilities are made primarily on examinations and include the provision of basic vocabulary to assist in the translation of review passages; a noun and adjective endings chart to assist with translation; unlimited time; and flexibility in exam scheduling.

Nineteen students with learning disabilities at the University of Colorado at Boulder enrolled in the first semester of the modified Latin program in Fall 1990. Of those 19, only three did not enroll in the third semester (Fall 1991) of the program. One obtained a waiver, another chose not to enroll, and the third was dropped from the program by the instructor at the end of the first semester. Of the 16 who completed the entire three-semester program, all but two passed the final semester. Many students received As, Bs, and Cs in all three semesters.

### **Considerations Involved in Teaching Foreign Languages to Students with Learning Disabilities**

Downey (1992) stresses several points:

- In order to be successful at the college level, many students with learning disabilities need to have the foreign language requirement modified.
- With a controlled enrollment, a modified curriculum, concerted effort, and a highly skilled instructor, most students with learning disabilities can complete at least two semesters of modified foreign language study.
- The severity of a student's learning disability is less important for success during the first semester than are the instructor's ability to modify course requirements and the student's ability to persevere and maintain motivation.
- Students who exhibit severe language or learning disabilities with deficits in vocabulary, syntax, and memory in addition to phonological processing problems will probably not be successful beyond the first or second semester of foreign language in spite of classroom modifications.
- Students with learning disabilities may experience considerable stress in other college classes in addition to foreign language classes. Flexibility in scheduling exams, extending time limits, allowing students to take exams out of class, and recognizing that some days they "just can't do it" are crucial.
- Instructors must be highly explicit with expectations, such as those about class attendance, homework, and class participation (Downey, 1992).

### **A Special Technique: Orton-Gillingham**

Orton-Gillingham is a multisensory technique, requiring the simultaneous use of the visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities. The technique has been received enthusiastically and is yielding some promising results at St. Paul's School for Girls in Brooklandville, MD (Sparks, Ganschow, Pohlman, Artzer, & Skinner, 1992), where it is used by teacher Karen Miller, who has adapted it for Spanish instruction. Further information about using the technique for native language instruction in reading, writing, and spelling is available from the Orton Dyslexia Society, Chester Building, Suite 382, 8600 LaSalle Road, Baltimore, MD 21204-0232.

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