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Оригинален научен труд
Original research paper

LEARNING DISABILITIES AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Brikena Xhaferri Ph.D.¹
Gezim Xhaferri Ph.D.¹

Abstract: The paper discusses in detail the issue of learning disabilities, the causes and instruction methods and materials in teaching this group of learners. It is intended primarily for teachers and also students involved in teaching and learning foreign languages. First of all, when teaching disabled students, foreign language teachers should do a needs analysis of the student's situation, problems and materials which should be used.

The article suggests that stakeholders involved in planning education in the Republic of Macedonia should consider the needs of this group of learners and have teachers who are specialists in the field to design appropriate curricula and teach them. Such efforts require greater and more long-term sources of funding for research, specifically in the areas of assessment and instruction, training, and assistive technology.

Key words: *learning disabilities, second language acquisition, teaching*

ПРЕЧКИ ВО УЧЕЊЕТО И УСВОЈУВАЊЕ НА ВТОР ЈАЗИК

д-р Брикена Џафери¹
д-р Гезим Џафери¹

Апстракт: Во овој труд се дискутира во детали прашањето поврзано со проблеми во учењето, причините за истите, методите на предавање, како и материјалот за предавањето кај оваа група ученици. Наменето е примарно за наставници кои предаваат, како и за ученици кои изучуваат странски јазици. Најпрво, во наставата со учениците со хендикеп, наставниците по странски јазик треба да направат анализа на потребите на моменталната ситуација на ученикот, како и на проблемите и материјалите кои треба да се употребат.

Овој труд предложува засегнатите страни вклучени во планирањето на едукацијата во Република Македонија да ги земат предвид потребите на оваа група на ученици и да ангажираат наставници кои се обучени за

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ова поле, со цел да дизајнираат соодветен курикулум и да им предаваат на овие ученици. Таквите напори бараат поголеми и подолготрајни извори во изведување на истражувањето, кое е специфично во областа на оценувањето и наставата, во тренингот и во помошната технологија.

Клучни зборови: *пречки во учењето, усвојување на втор јазик, предавање*

Introduction

Second language acquisition is an unconscious processes where the learners learn any additional language through exposure. Language learners differ in many aspects when they acquire a foreign language. The individual differences that influence second language acquisition are: aptitude, motivation, age, learning style, learning strategies and gender. Nevertheless, few studies in Macedonia deal with disabled students and their capacity to learn any foreign language. Children with learning disabilities might find it difficult to cope with real-life situations and also, they will fear that the language learnt cannot be used outside the class, this is true to the fact the self-esteem is very low. Thus, not only doctors and parents but also, the teachers can notice the behaviors in the class.

Do we ever notice and analyze in our classes the students' facial expressions or their reactions during the instructions for the different tasks? Do we take into consideration that we have to respond to the needs of every student in the class? This is an issue that bothers me a lot, and unfortunately, there has not been done much in Macedonia and the question "What can I do to help these students" remains in me. Since all the students should be treated the same, it's our responsibility to tailor courses according to their special needs.

Literature Review

According to Lock and Layton (2002) ... "students with limited English proficiency may be mistakenly identified as learning disabled due to inherent similarities between intrinsic processing deficits and the process of second language acquisition". These learning disabilities can affect every aspect of learning; and an academic symptom is the issue that we, language teachers, are concerned the most. Learning disabilities typically affect five general areas: spoken language, written language, arithmetic, reasoning, and memory. According to the research done no one have all the symptoms and the number of symptoms seen in a particular child does not give an indication as to whether the disability is mild or severe" ... (Ab.p.213).

According to Lock and Layton 2002, there are three causes of the learning disabilities.



1. Heredity- which means that often learning disabilities run in the family, and in many cases these children have parents with the same disease,
2. Problems during the pregnancy- which means that it might be caused by illness or injury during or before birth,
3. Accidents - which are very likely to happen in the head.

Ganschow and Sparks (1993) are among the first researchers who began investigating ways that learning disabled students could be helped to learn a foreign language and for the first time they use the term “foreign language learning disability” (FLLD). They further suggest that in order to help these types of learners we should; a) make an enquiry into the student’s developmental and family learning history, b) make an inquiry into the student’s elementary and secondary educational history, c) an enquiry into all previous experiences with foreign language learning, d) assessment of intelligence, language functioning, and academic achievement and e) administration of linguistic-based assessment instructions.

On the other hand, Schwarz and Burt (1995) point out that “by Law, learning disability (LD) is defined as significant gap between a person’s intelligence and the skills the person has achieved at each stage. Children acquire language through a process of natural use in real life experiences. Similarly, second language is also acquired by way of natural use in real life experiences “... (ERIC).

These students perform poorly on group tests, experience reversals in reading and writing, are easily confused by instructions and develop poor peer relationship. Genesee (2000) argues that the specialized functions of specific regions of the brain are not fixed at birth but are shaped by experience and learning. To use a computer analogy, we now think that the young brain is like a computer with incredibly sophisticated hardwiring, but no software. The software of the brain, like the software of desktop computers, harnesses the exceptional processing capacity of the brain in the service of specialized functions, like vision, smell, and language. All individuals have to acquire or develop their own software in order to harness the processing power of the brain with which they are born...”(para. 2).

Maldonado (1994) considers that “Bilingual students are often lost between these two levels of proficiency in L1 and L2. Language interference results from inadequate development of L1 and L2. These interferences may result in the inability to achieve the native language or English as a second language (para.11).

Thus, even though a learning disability does not disappear, the teacher can provide help by giving the right types of educational experiences and enhancing the motivation. The first step for a teacher is to learn to recognize the symptoms of the learning disabled students and as we know more about



some of the learning disabilities that we might encounter, the next step is to figure out how we can help (LeLoup & Ponterio, 1997).

The communication needed to learn cooperatively will not only strengthen the language, but will also strengthen understanding and retention of the concept being learned. An important component of cooperative learning is the opportunity it provides for students to take responsibility for their cooperative roles (Raborn, 1995 p.6). These programs might take some time but the results will be evident. Schwarz and Burt, (1995) give an example of The Learning Disabilities Association (LDA) in Minneapolis, in a project funded by the Minnesota Department of Education and Medtronics, Inc., used a combination of measures at the Lehmann ABE center to assess adult ESL learners who were suspected of having learning disabilities. The assessment included some standardized tests--the Basic English Skills Test (BEST), the Learning Styles Inventory, a phonics inventory, and the Test of Non-verbal Intelligence-R (Toni-R)--as well as some alternative assessment--learner observations by teachers and learning disabilities specialists, and native language writing samples and interviews. I believe that we as teachers possess the ability to find out the difficulties and strengths of every student.

Instructional Methods and Materials

It is our belief that the language teachers should be trained in using special teaching methodologies for dealing with disabled students in their classes. In four stages of language acquisition: in pre-production the teacher should provide activities chosen carefully for them and do not force speaking, after that early production the teacher activates that small vocabulary that they have and finally, encourage them to produce the language. Also, a peer can be signed to help the disabled learner understand the essential information. Because, of a great importance is the support that they can get from peers and it gives them the safety of being loved and respected by the others.

Then, their engagement at home should be planned very carefully and assignments should be directly related to the work that they had in the class, and give them more extra time to complete them. LeLoup and Ponterio (1997) support the technology in teaching as a very important tool to help the students to improve their overall performance. The “Assistive Technology” section includes links to journals specializing in assistive technology (AT) for disabled persons. I strongly agree with their statement because technology can enhance learning with visuals, provide them with variety of learning materials and finally, give them more options to become independent learners.

Learning disabilities affect learning in any language and must therefore be a guiding factor in designing instruction for the adult learner with disabilities. Educators of learning disabled children and adults (Almanza, Singleton, & Terrill, 1995/96; Baca & Cervantes, 1991; Ganschow & Sparks, 1993 cited



in Schwarz and Terill, ERIC) give the following suggestions for providing instruction:

- Be highly structured and predictable.
- Teach small amounts of material at one time in sequential steps.
- Include opportunities to use several senses and learning strategies.
- Provide multisensory reviews.
- Recognize and build on learners' strengths and prior knowledge.
- Simplify language but not content.
- Emphasize content words and make concepts accessible through the use of pictures, charts, maps, etc.
- Reinforce main ideas and concepts through rephrasing rather than through verbatim repetition.
- Be aware that learners often can take in information, but may experience difficulty retrieving it and sorting it appropriately.
- Provide a clean, uncluttered, quiet, and well-lit learning environment.

We strongly believe that some of the abovementioned suggestions can be used in the Macedonian context because the number of the ESL population with special needs is increasing more and more and the language teachers are not well-equipped to meet their needs. They deserve to be treated like the others. But, unfortunately the reality that we are facing is that we need to be more involved in special training programs and find our own ways to affect their minds.

Conclusion: There is a possibility that learning disability does not influence all areas of learning, it may have a significant impact on the social and work life of the learner. Therefore, the field of English language teaching must intensify its efforts to assist learning disabled learners and their teachers. Authorities in the Republic of Macedonia should consider the needs of this group of learners and have teachers who are specialists in the field to design appropriate curricula and teach them. Such efforts require greater and more long-term sources of funding for research, specifically in the areas of assessment and instruction, training, and assistive technology.

All parents would probably accept all ideas offered by the teachers in order to give their best to help him and make him proud student who is loved and respectful from all the people in the world because learning is the strongest tool to activate even the brains that were born with shadow.



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