

# **PRACTICE BRIEF**

## **Project LINC: Supporting Lecturers and Adjunct Instructors in Foreign Language Classrooms**

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### **Abstract**

Foreign language learning can pose a barrier to some students with disabilities. This practice brief describes a collaborative process used on one campus to provide professional development for foreign language instructors. Training opportunities were intentionally focused on the needs of adjunct and temporary lecturers in providing inclusive beginning and intermediate language courses. Trends in student final grades and foreign language requirement waivers are discussed.

*Keywords: Faculty development, inclusive instruction, foreign language*

A recent survey by the Modern Language Association found that approximately 50% of U.S. colleges require the study of foreign language for graduation (Lewin, 2010). A long history of research has shown that students with learning disabilities (LD) may experience difficulty in foreign language classrooms in such key areas as phonological/orthographic processing, syntactic and semantic knowledge, and expressive or receptive oral and written language (Sparks, 2008). Empirical findings of potential difficulty have been extended to students with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorders (ADHD) as well (Sparks, Philips, & Javorsky, 2003). Published case studies (e.g., Abrams, 2008) provide insight into other potentially challenging interactions of disability and foreign language learning across the broad pedagogical areas of reading, writing, speaking, and listening as well as cultural awareness.

Colleges and universities have responded to the needs of students with disabilities in foreign language learning through a combination of classroom accommodation, instructional modification, and policy considerations. In a review of the literature on evidence-based practices, Ofesh (2007) reported that extended time on tests and the provision of a note taker were

two primary accommodations in foreign language classrooms. Instructional approaches to access have consisted of extended accommodations designed specifically for the discipline of foreign language learning (Scott & Manglitz, 2000) and the development of modified instruction provided in separate classrooms focused on the specific needs of students with learning disabilities (e.g., Downey & Snyder, 2001). A final approach to access has been to permit waivers or course substitutions for the foreign language requirement on a selective case-by-case basis (Shaw, 1999). While institutional policies and practices vary, a majority of college campuses include this administrative option for individual students with disabilities (Driscoll, 2003).

### **Problem**

A foreign language requirement for all students was implemented at Longwood University in 2002. In order to assure access, students with disabilities were offered traditional classroom accommodations and, on a case-by-case basis, the administrative option to petition for a waiver of the foreign language requirement. Over a four-year period the number of student petitions increased annually. The Modern Languages

program and the Disability Resources Office began a collaboration to examine the accommodation process, clarify advising for students provided by both departments, consider policy revisions, and examine instructional options. An outcome of that collaboration was the hypothesis that providing more inclusive instruction would result in the need for fewer waivers of the requirement—a desirable goal for both departments. After a review of the professional literature, it was found that models for specially designed sections of foreign language classes for students with LD were available (e.g., Leons & Hebert, 2002), but little information could be located on making the learning experience more inclusive for students with a variety of disabilities within the regular foreign language curriculum. Another challenge was that most beginning and intermediate foreign language courses on campus were taught by adjunct instructors and temporary lecturers, a widespread staffing practice in higher education (Modern Language Association [MLA], 2007).

### **Students and Location**

Longwood University is a residential, state-supported, four-year institution in rural central Virginia, enrolling 4000 undergraduates in three colleges: Arts and Sciences, Education and Human Services, and Business and Economics. Five percent of the student body is registered with the Office of Disability Resources. With the exception of students granted a foreign language waiver, all students earning a degree pass a foreign language course at the intermediate level (the third semester of the standard sequence) or higher. Most students who complete a placement test during freshmen orientation enter the sequence through one of the beginning level courses. Seventy percent of students place in a level below the required course, and thus spend at least two semesters in the foreign language sequence. In any given semester, approximately 750 students (19% of the undergraduate student body) are enrolled in general education classes in French, German, or Spanish. Seventy-nine percent of those courses are taught by part time, temporary, or untenured faculty.

### **Strategy**

An approach to support students with disabilities and instructors in the foreign language classroom was developed, and Project LINC (Learning in Inclusive Classrooms) was successfully funded through the

U.S. Department of Education. The purpose of LINC was to create a faculty development curriculum that increases instructors' awareness both of diverse learners and of design strategies for inclusive pedagogy. The co-directors of the project—one, the director of Disability Resources; the other, a French professor and program coordinator—met monthly over the course of a year with a small group of senior language faculty (a Leadership and Development Team, [LDT]) to isolate key topics and research best practices. Then, in two subsequent years, a two-pronged approach was used to train adjunct and contingent instructors in the department. In a series of workshops, traditional approaches to disability access were addressed: clarifying university requirements, increasing awareness of non-visible disabilities, and specifying procedures for student accommodation. Second, after an introduction to the principles of Universal Design for Instruction (Scott, McGuire, & Shaw, 2003), monthly meetings were held to examine barriers to learning experienced by students with disabilities and to reevaluate the design of classroom instruction.

The curriculum's bifurcated structure allowed participants to maintain a heightened awareness of inclusive design over the course of the academic year. A first meeting was held one week before the semester started. This 3-hour foundation workshop introduced participants to the value of inclusive design, stressed the importance of considering the background, anxieties, and motivations of all students in the classroom, and suggested some simple start-up activities (see Table 1). The foundation workshop was followed by monthly 90-minute topical workshops addressing key areas identified by the LDT including target language use, error correction, inclusive group work, foreign language instruction anxiety, and assessment strategies. To help animate and inform the conversation throughout the year, participants prepared for each workshop by reviewing a set of brief reflection questions and a recent article from a peer reviewed journal. During these topical workshops, a variety of inclusive strategies were introduced, such as providing a list of useful classroom expressions to scaffold support in target language use, designing group activities that consider mobility needs of students in wheelchairs, and providing assignments and assessments in multiple formats.

Although members of the cohort were able to tailor individual design elements to their specific classrooms, styles, and needs, most LINC participants implemented

Table 1

*Foundation Workshop Overview and Resources***Foundation Workshop Overview**

The need for Project LINC

Who are our students?

- Longwood student demographic information
- Students with disabilities: Numbers and diagnoses

Working with the Disability Resources Office

Inclusive teaching

- The power of design: How design influences performance
- Principles of Universal Design for Instruction

Getting started: Early steps toward a more inclusive instruction

- High school and college for students with disabilities: Key differences
- Case study: Foreign language autobiography as a tool for understanding individual learning needs

Schedule for the year ahead: Topical workshops in the fall and spring

**Foreign Language Teaching Resources (Handouts)**

The Effective Foreign Language Teacher Checklist

Important Activities for the Beginning of the Semester

Getting to Know your Students: Foreign Language Autobiography Activity

Advising Tips for the Foreign Language Goal

Foreign Language Placement Guidelines

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages: Standards for Foreign Language Learning

**Disability Resources (Handouts)**

Disability Services FAQ

Early Warning Feedback Form: A Communication Tool for Monitoring Student Performance

Options for Accommodation & Supports in Foreign Language Learning

**Related Reading**

Gregory, M. (2008). Do we teach disciplines or do we teach students? *Profession*, 117-129.

Kinzie, S. (2008, October 25). Bumps abound when students become their own advocates; Special needs can make transition to college tricky. *The Washington Post*, p. A1.

several basic techniques. First, a disability statement alerting students to the resources available on campus was added to course syllabi. This simple statement signaled the instructor's awareness of learning diversity and helped to create a welcoming environment for all students. Second, during the first week of classes, instructors asked students to complete a short "foreign language autobiography" that encouraged them to reflect on their specific experiences and learning needs. The information gleaned from this autobiography allowed instructors to discuss with all students common

course concerns and barriers, just as the semester was starting. Finally, through internal communication avenues, LINC participants were encouraged to provide early feedback to the Office of Disability Resources about the performance of registered students who self-identified to the instructor. If needed, the facilitation of an early three-way conversation involving the student, the instructor, and the Office of Disability Resources ensured prompt support for identified students.

### Observations and Outcomes

Feedback from faculty after each workshop and at the end of the academic year indicated that participants had greater awareness of the diversity of students in their classrooms and more confidence in their ability to accommodate and teach these students. Scheduling the monthly workshops was a challenge with varied adjunct instructors' schedules and availability, as was providing sufficient incentives for these busy professionals. Using grant funds of Project LINC, participants were paid a small honorarium for their participation in the training. This was minimal, however, and other no-cost incentives were also used by the project to address this challenge. The rare opportunity to meet regularly and talk about teaching with other faculty members (adjuncts as well as senior faculty) was reported as motivating and germane. Also, faculty who participated in five or more of the monthly workshops were awarded a Certificate of Inclusive Teaching signed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and intended for inclusion in their professional portfolios.

Two broad measures of student outcomes were

examined. Final grades in all beginning and intermediate foreign language classes were compiled for five semesters of baseline data before Project LINC and throughout the project. Performance of students with disclosed disabilities (defined as students registered with the campus Disability Resources Office) was compared with students without disclosed disabilities (see Table 2). The average performance of students with disabilities in foreign language classrooms across instructors and across languages showed an increase in the number of students achieving a final grade of A, B, or C and a decrease in the number of students withdrawing at some point during the semester. Student final grades across groups are now similar.

Foreign language waiver requests submitted to the campus Petitions Committee (the university structure charged with reviewing this accommodation) were also reviewed over a nine year period (see Table 3). During the six years prior to Project LINC, eight waivers on average were approved annually. Since the onset of Project LINC the annual average has dropped to four foreign language waivers.

Table 2

*Associated Impact of Project Linc: Student Final Grades in Beginning and Intermediate Language Courses (Spanish, French, German)*

Fall 2006 - Fall 2008 (Before Project LINC)

	Final Grade A - C	Final Grade D	Final Grade F	Final Grade W
Disability N=213	63%	12%	7%	18%
No Disability N=3942	76%	12%	7%	5%

Fall 2009 - Fall 2010

	Final Grade A - C	Final Grade D	Final Grade F	Final Grade W
Disability N=213	74%	14%	5%	7%
No Disability N=2817	76%	12%	7%	5%

**Implications**

Adjunct instructors, knowledgeable in foreign language but working outside the mainstream of the university, are in need of support and resources to teach the many diverse learners in their classrooms. Professional development designed to enhance connections with campus disability offices and senior faculty contributed to a viable and sustainable approach to supporting these instructors. Additionally, creating formal opportunities for instructors to talk about the challenges of teaching lead to a greater understanding of inclusive foreign language learning experiences.

Change has occurred within the foreign language program at Longwood University. While no single causative factor can be identified, student outcomes on the measures of final grades and foreign language waivers are compelling. Performance patterns of students without disabilities have remained consistent, while students with disabilities—reflecting a broad cross-section of cognitive and physical diversity—have demonstrated a shift toward greater academic success. In the context of greater student success in passing foreign

language coursework, waivers of the foreign language requirement have decreased 50%. These changes may perhaps be attributed to greater awareness of student diversity, enhanced communication across departments, and encouragement of faculty to focus on their ability to modify instructional features to be more inclusive. The design of professional development catered to the needs of adjuncts and temporary instructors has increased communication and collaboration between the foreign language program and the Disability Resources Office, resulting in a more positive and equitable experience for students with disabilities.

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Table 3

*Associated Impact of Project Linc: Number of Foreign Language Waivers Approved*

<u>Academic Year</u>	<u>Number of FL Waivers Approved</u>
2002-2003	4
2003-2004	5
2004-2005	9
2005-2006	15
2006-2007	9
2007-2008	9
2008-2009	2
2009-2010	8
2010-2011	2

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