

No Teacher Left Behind:

Early Language Learning and Students with Disabilities

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Today, foreign language teachers are faced with more challenges than ever before. These challenges are due to technological advancements, new educational policies and reforms, a rapidly changing student population and recent legislations and documents designed for educating *all* students (Curtain and Pesola, 2004; Peyton, 1997; Robinson, 1998; Spinelli, 1996). Foreign languages used to be taught mainly to the elite, rich or to the gifted population. However, it has now shifted priorities. This is reflected in *The National Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (1996), which states:

“The United States must educate students who are equipped linguistically and culturally to communicate successfully in a pluralistic American society and abroad. This imperative envisions a future in which *all* students will develop and maintain proficiency in English and at least one other language, modern or classical.”

All students may include, but is not limited to, those who are from culturally, linguistically and ethnically diverse backgrounds and students with various types and levels of disability. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the number of public school English Language Learners (ELLs) in 1993/1994 was approximately 2.1 million (NCES, n.d.). Statistics showed that thirty percent of the public school teachers had received training for teaching ELLs and only three percent had received a specific degree in bilingual education or ESL (NCES, n.d.). The number of ELL children continues to rise. It has been reported that there were approximately 4.6 million limited English proficient students or 9.6 % of the public school enrollment in 2001 (NCELA, 2002). The current population of special needs children in a federally funded program is approximately 6,195,000 of which forty-six percent of students with disability spend eighty percent or more time in a regular classroom, whereas in 1988 only thirty one percent did so (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). These numbers are projected to grow and reflect the critical necessity to provide pre-service and in-service teachers with formal education in teaching foreign languages to monolingual and English Language Learners with special needs.

The shift from restrictive environments, where special needs and limited English proficient students were segregated from their peers, to less restrictive environments, where such students have more opportunity to interact with their non-disabled and/or English speaking peers has been influenced by various federal legislations and policies. One such policy is the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) of 1997, which mandates that all disabled students have to be provided with a free and appropriate education. An important principle that influences the foreign language teacher is the inclusion of special needs students with their non-disabled peers. This inclusion must be supported by Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) to provide accommodation, services and support to the disabled and/or the ELL student.

Policy concerning foreign language teachers in the past decade consisted of *Goals 2000* which stated that teachers should be provided with continuous professional development in order to prepare *all* American students for the next century. This document further stated that “*all* students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages...” In addition, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) under the current *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) may also assess foreign language learning in grades 4, 8, and 12, if monetary funds and time allow it (NCES, 2002). In addition, an important event was the inclusion of foreign languages as the core subject under NCLB. As such, NCLB requires that all teachers in public schools of core subjects must be highly-qualified. These policies reflect that foreign language teachers will be faced with various issues, such as inclusive practices, skills, specific competencies with foreign languages, special needs, basis of second language development, and/or methods of assessment. Furthermore, foreign language teachers will also face opportunities and added responsibility of teaching foreign languages to special needs children in self-contained classroom, such as the Educable Mentally Handicapped (EMH) or other self-contained

classes if it is also provided to non-disabled peers in the school. Therefore, it is important that teachers are equipped with the tools and knowledge to better assist their students and themselves in this endeavor. Teacher education programs, professional development workshops and mentoring programs should provide teachers the resources, skills and tools to adequately instruct such diverse student populations. Curtain and Pesola (2004) list three areas which preparation of teachers for early language classrooms must address:

1. Language skills and understanding of the culture within which the language is used;
2. Experiences and methodology for teaching languages to children;
3. Curriculum knowledge and philosophies of school (p. 242).

However these 'must' areas do not include curriculum adaptations, teaching strategies or models for early language classrooms with ELLs and/or special needs children. ACTFL's 1988 guidelines (in Curtain & Pesola) for preparing teachers at the elementary school level include various characteristics. One of which states, "familiarity with aspects of the target culture appropriate to the developmental needs and interests of students..." (p. 243). ACTFL's 2002 guidelines for the preparation of foreign language teachers state: "Candidates demonstrate an understanding of the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development of K-12 students at all levels of instruction." (p. 24). The afore mentioned guidelines specify that foreign language teachers need an understanding, but not *experience* or specific skills in early foreign language learning with special needs monolingual or ELL children.

Qualitative and quantitative research in early foreign language learning is not vast and few articles have been published in this area. Rosenbusch (1998) states "currently, very little information specific to the field is available to foreign language teachers of young students to help them in this endeavor" (p. 59). However, awareness is increasing, more descriptive reports are being collected and initial questions are being raised. Kertschmer & Kertschmer (1998) outlined that foreign language teachers need to know how the disability influences the language learning process. The authors categorized disabilities with regard to foreign language learning into four broad categories (this classification considers only one primary disability and not more). These categories are hearing and visual impairment, severe motor control disabilities, disturbances in neurological and biochemical development and

severe socio-emotional problems. Students who are classified as hearing and visually impaired usually have the cognitive abilities for learning languages, but lack communicative and language abilities due to the lack of exposure to the aural/visual environment and sensory disabilities. Severe motor control disabled children also have the cognitive abilities but are physically and communicatively impaired to express the language. Children with disturbances in neurological and biochemical development usually are cognitively/neurologically impaired to various degrees and cannot acquire various aspects of the language such as the syntactic, pragmatic, lexical forms of words. The last category, children with severe socio-emotional problems have obstacles to their language learning mainly with the semantic forms of language (for a more detailed description of these categories see Kertschmer et al).

Kertschmer's classification is important with regard to teacher preparation programs and in-service professional development in that instructional material can be adapted according to the category of disability to overcome some of the obstacles and challenges students might have. The ability to learn another language is possible when individualized solutions are outlined and obstacles are overcome with support; however these obstacles are even more difficult to overcome when they are due to severe language disorders, developmental delays and severe barriers to learning (Kertschmer, 1998). Descriptive studies have also shown that special needs children of various degrees and types are capable of learning other languages. For example, Candelaria-Greene (1996) reports of children in Kenya diagnosed with mental retardation (MR) and their ability to acquire fluency in three or more languages. She had found that since the social discourse environment required individuals to communicate in various languages, depending who they were communicating with, the children with MR also became fluent in the languages around them. This article supports the notion that language learning is not solely dependent on cognitive ability. Others have reported that individualization, inclusion, and program types are indeed important aspects in teaching early foreign language learners with special needs. Torres (1998) reports that individualization and addressing student's abilities on an individual basis are successful methods that are taken into consideration at their school. Teachers also believed that inclusion is important and their school district's philosophy is that 'all children should have the opportunity to learn a language' (p. 60). Gouin (1998), Holobow

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(1998) and Genesee (1987) reported on immersion programs that included special needs and learning disabled children. Gouin reports that accommodations need to be determined based on individualized needs. These range from adapting activities, alternative assessments, pair/group work, individual attention, etc. Holobow's and Genesee's reports have also shown that there are some benefits of language disabled children in immersive environments. Wing (1996) also reports on special needs children within various foreign language settings and provides an excellent example of a school district that values and encourages foreign language education. The author describes a FLES program in Putnam City School, Oklahoma City, which offers foreign language programs to 18 elementary schools from grades K-12. Inclusion in these schools represents learning disabled students, physically impaired and limited English proficient students. Some of the characteristics of a school system adapting to a more diverse population have been opportunities for professional development; providing opportunities for teachers, special education and ESOL specialists to consult with one another. Overall, from this limited review of research it can be seen that an individualized approach has been utilized and a strong parental support is also evident. Yet, empirical data are limited in the area of early foreign language learning/teaching of special needs (Wing, 1996). More research and information is needed in the areas of:

- inclusive environments and foreign language learning/teaching (Rosenbusch, 1998);
- the effects of various program types and disability (Holobow, 1998);
- the role of paraprofessionals/personal assistants and foreign language learning;
- longitudinal cognitive benefits of foreign language learning with special needs population;
- relationship between the types and levels of disability and foreign language learning;
- in-depth analysis and critique of teacher

preparation programs that include development in the area of early language learning with special needs students;

- and a need to re-examine the current paradigm of teaching early foreign languages for diverse students with special needs.

Sparks & Ganschow (1993) and Sparks (1995) have devoted much of their research toward high school and university at risk/learning disabled students. For example, a Sparks, Ganschow, Pohlman, Skinner, and Artzer (1992) study of high school learning disabled students (mean age of 14 years) showed that by using direct instruction with the Multisensory Language instructed (MSL) approach in both Spanish and English, students significantly improved in their native language phonology and vocabulary skills. The implication of such research is also applicable for the early foreign language learning field where more critical analysis and research needs to be conducted to answer questions, such as: What types of foreign language programs are most suitable for young monolingual or ELL students with special needs? Is the communicative approach most suitable for special needs populations? Is immersion, FLEX, or FLES an advantageous program for at-risk students? To what depth is explicit instruction needed? What types of assessments should be carried out to best reflect the actual and potential level of knowledge?

Most foreign language teachers who do not have experience and professional development with this population are faced with teaching their students to the best of their abilities without the tools, methodologies, program types or aids that are necessary for successful teaching of foreign languages. There is a dearth of research and a dire need to prepare all teachers for the challenges that they are facing. Ultimately, it is the teacher who will influence and teach our children, but it is up to all of us in the profession of teaching and teacher education that we prepare our teachers for the obstacles that lay ahead, making sure that no teacher is left behind in this endeavor.

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