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**Elke Schneider and
Margaret Crombie**

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David Fulton Publishers

David Fulton Publishers
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

First published 2003
Transferred to digital printing

*David Fulton Publishers is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group,
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British
Library.

ISBN 1 85346 966 1

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Typeset by Pracharak Technologies (P) Ltd, Madras, India

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Foreword

We are indeed indebted to the authors Elke Schneider and Margaret Crombie for utilising their vast experience, in both research and practice in foreign languages, in this book. We know of no other book as concise and comprehensive in its comments, discussions and strategies for foreign language learners.

As the authors suggest, learning foreign languages (FL) can provide a challenge to children and young adults with dyslexia. This can also provide a challenge to educators who are responsible for the accommodations that can help to ensure that the potential demands of language learning are minimised for those with dyslexia.

Crombie and Schneider illustrate very clearly how this can be achieved and describe why foreign languages can be so demanding for students with dyslexia. They also highlight specific examples of the accommodations that can be made as well as considering the influence of legislation on education and dyslexia.

This book has been written following extensive research and, as the authors point out, the techniques and strategies presented in this book are relevant no matter the country or the language. They also rightly point out that foreign language learning can and should be possible for the vast majority of students. They maintain it is the right of every student to be able to attempt to learn a foreign language.

The innovative chapter on metacognition ([Chapter 3](#)) highlights the need to allow the student to take responsibility for his/her own learning and this chapter demonstrates, through utilising the findings from the fields of psychology and education, how this can be achieved. The authors provide scores of strategies to facilitate successful learning and to help the student with dyslexia achieve success. At the same time the authors highlight the responsibility of teachers to be aware of how they themselves can maximise students' potential and provide students with the opportunities for success.

There are many barriers to foreign language learning and these are explored by the authors. With this in mind they provide a sound hypothesis when they say that ‘if the curriculum is geared to the needs of individual foreign language learners, including those with dyslexia, then students along the entire continuum of FL aptitude stand a good chance of success. How the curriculum is presented is important.’ This provides an excellent framework of support for teachers and educators, and this book therefore must surely be an essential tool for all those engaged in foreign language learning and teaching.

The authors have taken a broad perspective focusing not only on describing the difficulties but also on constructive comments on support strategies that can promote autonomy in learning. Their message that ‘the ethos of the whole school influences learning’ should not be lost on educators. Students with dyslexia, regardless of their age, are particularly sensitive to conditions in their learning environments. Therefore, it is vital, as the authors suggest, that the learning environment be positive and constructive. It is also important that teachers are familiar with dyslexia, its characteristics and how success in the foreign languages classroom can be achieved by students with dyslexia. We believe this book will go a long way towards helping teachers achieve this goal.

Lindsay Peer CBE
Gavin Reid
May 2003

Introduction

This book sets out to inform foreign/second language educators and to offer support to teachers on the nature of dyslexic difficulties as they affect the learning of another language. It presents teaching and assessment strategies for those with specific language processing difficulties which are commonly associated with dyslexia. While the term ‘dyslexia’ is used throughout this book, the strategies presented will work well for many students, not just those who have the officially identified language processing difficulty called ‘dyslexia’.

Background and definitions

Definitions of dyslexia are many and varied. The Greek root of the word does little to simplify the debate over exactly what dyslexia is. The term comes from two Greek words: *dys* (here meaning ‘difficulty with’) and *lexicos* or *lexis* (meaning ‘words’) (Doyle 1996: 69; BPS 1999: 18). This description, taken to refer to written words of a language, whether related to reading, spelling and/or writing, provides a vague indication of what is involved.

For well over a hundred years now, dyslexia has been recognised and knowledge accumulates with every year that passes. Researchers have come together from various disciplines to pool their knowledge with a mind to developing our knowledge base and improving practice for dyslexic people of all ages. [Chapter 1](#) sets out why it is that dyslexic students find language learning particularly problematic, but it is important to state here that dyslexia exists on a continuum with every student being an individual with a different pattern of strengths and weaknesses. Although difficulties vary in severity between individuals, there is a set of common characteristics, many of which generally affect language learning (Miles 1993; Miles and Miles 1999). Even for those students whose native language has reached a very adequate standard, the learning of a foreign language

can present particular challenges. Besides the difficulties of reading and spelling that are generally associated with dyslexia, there are difficulties in recognising language patterns that are presented orally. This makes the discovery of grammatical and/or lexical word patterns difficult or sometimes almost impossible without specific interventions. Poor handwriting too can affect the flow (and therefore the processing) of patterns. Difficulties can therefore be oral, auditory, kinaesthetic and visual. In short, dyslexia generally affects the oral and written language skills that are essential for success in learning a foreign language (Gerber 1993; Lerner 1997). Difficulties tend to run in families and have a genetic base manifesting themselves to varying degrees over generations.

Neurologists have studied the differences in brain structure (often unexpected variations in structures and functioning of the hemispheres of the brain) and processing (different patterns of brain activation) (Bakker 1990; Perani *et al.* 1996). While dyslexia is not curable and language processing cannot be ‘fixed’ by wearing tinted glasses or hearing aids, there is still much we can do to make learning easier for the dyslexic student. For the foreign language educator, dyslexia can be seen as a difficulty that slows down the ‘in-brain’ language processing procedure, demanding more concentration and time for processing than a non-dyslexic student will require. This results in the dyslexic student seeming to have a short concentration span for both oral and written language. In order to meet the needs of the dyslexic pupil in the language learning process, foreign language educators and parents can apply specific strategies and accommodations which have been researched and proved successful in facilitating learning and teaching in foreign languages. Test-taking and study strategies are described in later chapters and these too are an essential part of successfully tackling the language learning programme of dyslexic students.

For the purposes of this book, the dyslexia definition of Crombie (2002: 223) is used to refer to those ‘who have a difficulty with literacy which results in them requiring a set of accommodations to be made to enable them to demonstrate their abilities’.

Accommodations

Accommodations in the foreign/second language classroom can then be defined as ‘a set of enabling arrangements which are put in place to ensure that the dyslexic person can demonstrate their

strengths and abilities, and show attainment' (Crombie 2002: 222). Accommodations could refer to the use of a reader and/or scribe to enable the person to demonstrate what they know without the necessity to read or write directly. The use of technology to produce work would be another example of an accommodation. This is further explored in later chapters of this book. The challenge when working with dyslexic people in school settings is to enable them to show what they can do, not what they cannot do, thus empowering them and including them in the classroom. This is particularly important in what often seems to be an intimidating foreign language learning situation.

The current inclusive educational philosophy is embodied in the previously described definition of dyslexia and suggests how accommodations can enable the dyslexic student, thus including them in the foreign language curriculum. This accords with the present legislation which makes discrimination on the grounds of disability illegal and requires learning to take place in the least restrictive environment and aims to emphasise a person's abilities rather than lacking skills (Disability Discrimination Act 1995). For the teacher in the classroom, the priority is to enable curricular access for any dyslexic individual in more than physical terms. To be truly included, the pupils must actively participate in all learning and teaching activities of the classroom. The foreign language classroom is no exception.

Many of the strategies discussed in the book could refer to almost any language, though the authors' experiences lie mainly in European languages. Languages that have a more pictorial script may require a different approach with multi-sensory structured teaching strategies of new letter or whole word shapes tied to sounds. Most of the principles of teaching and learning outlined in the book, however, will be very similar.

Terminology

In producing this book, the authors had considerable discussion on the terminology to use, and the differences that exist on both sides of the Atlantic. The term 'foreign language (FL)' has been used in order to include the 'dead' languages. There is no reason to assume that 'dead' languages (e.g. Latin) will present different learning challenges for dyslexic students than modern foreign languages, and no reason to assume that dyslexic students will not study a 'dead'

language at some point. We also use the term ‘FL educator’ frequently to include teachers, tutors and lecturers. The term is used in its widest sense to cover all those involved in the education of those learning a foreign language. We do, however, use other terms as and when appropriate.

Challenges

For teachers of foreign languages, support teachers, modern languages assistants, classroom assistants, auxiliaries, dyslexic learners and parents there are many challenges to be addressed. There is no guarantee of success, but some of the greatest barriers to success are negative attitudes. With a positive outlook, an emphasis on achievement and a variety of strategies to try out if any one technique is unsuccessful, the outcomes have a good chance of being favourable. Even if the student is never able to produce brilliantly written language or to read particularly well, confidence in listening, understanding and speaking the language of choice must be the main aims of our teaching to dyslexic students who already struggle to read and write in their native language. If we can also make the language learning process personally meaningful, motivating and fun for the learner, we can truly congratulate ourselves and our students on a successful outcome.