

## Adjusting Foreign Languages' Syllabuses to the Specific Academic Needs of Students with Special Needs

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### Abstract

Students with special needs have the same right to learn foreign languages in schools and universities as ordinary students do. Therefore, based on appropriate professional support and teaching methods and techniques, students with special needs will be capable of learning foreign languages. This assumption led to the adaptation of foreign languages' curriculum for the benefit of students with disabilities who require adaptive teaching within the regular school or university educational system. The present study aims at offering guidelines for adjusting and implementing foreign languages' syllabuses for students with special needs. Seeking to achieve the aims of the study, two semi-structured interviews have been administered to both students and teachers. Six (06) teachers divided equally between English and French in addition to two (02) blind students have been chosen. The study was conducted during the academic year 2016/2017 at the Department of English and French at the University of Hamma Lakhdar in El-Oued, Algeria. The findings of the study are expected to assist teachers in adjusting their teaching and evaluation techniques to the specific learning needs of their students with disabilities.

**Key words:** adjusting, disabilities, learning needs, students with special needs, foreign languages' syllabuses.

### ملخص

الطلبة ذوي الاحتياجات الخاصة لهم نفس الحق في تعلم اللغات الأجنبية في المدارس والجامعات كما هو الحال بالنسبة للطلبة العاديين. لذلك، وبالاعتماد على الدعم الاحترافي المناسب وطرائق وتقنيات التدريس الخاصة يصبح في إمكان الطلبة ذوي الاحتياجات الخاصة تعلم اللغات الأجنبية. وقد أدى هذا الافتراض إلى تكييف مناهج اللغات الأجنبية لفائدة الطلبة المعاقين الذين يحتاجون إلى تعليم مكيف داخل النظام التعليمي المدرسي أو الجامعي العادي. تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى تقديم مبادئ توجيهية لتعديل وتنفيذ مناهج اللغات الأجنبية لصالح الطلبة ذوي الاحتياجات الخاصة. وسعياً لتحقيق أهداف الدراسة، تم إجراء مقابلتين شبه منظمة مع كل من الأساتذة والطلبة. وقد تم اختيار

سته (06) أساتذة مقسمين بالتساوي بين اللغة الانجليزية والفرنسية بالإضافة إلى طالبين تعانين إعاقة بصرية. وقد نفذت هذه الدراسة خلال العام الجامعي 2017/2016 على مستوى قسم اللغة الانجليزية والفرنسية بجامعة حمه لخضر بالوادي، الجزائر. ويتوقع أن تساعد نتائج هذه الدراسة الأساتذة على تعديل أساليب التدريس والتقويم الخاصة بهم لتلبي احتياجات التعلم الخاصة بالطلاب ذوي الاحتياجات الخاصة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التكيف، الإعاقة، الاحتياجات التعليمية، الطلبة ذوي الاحتياجات الخاصة، مناهج اللغات الأجنبية.

## Introduction

One of the most obvious aspects of humanistic education is how to treat those who are somehow different, standing out from the mainstream that defines general learning objectives and curriculum. A rather sizable subgroup of these “different” learners are learners with special educational needs, which are seen, in this study, in the context of foreign language education.

Foreign language education of learners with special educational needs is one of the fields of language pedagogy which constantly demands more attention from teachers, researchers, teacher trainers, education-system decision-makers and managers. Despite the growing number of research outputs, their systematic summary is still necessary.

This paper overviews some key factors for successful implementation of foreign language teaching with special emphasis on learners with language learning disabilities or special needs. The paper emphasizes the importance of different factors relevant to foreign language learning of students with mentioned difficulties, such as aptitude in foreign language learning, teachers’ role in educating these students, and the choice of appropriate teaching methods and necessary instructional modifications.

The purpose of this research work is to serve as a guide for the modification and implementation of foreign languages’ syllabuses for students with disabilities. The study provides the rationale for the modified program, and principles of teaching English as a foreign language to students with disabilities.

## 1. Literature Review

### 1.1 Defining Learning Disabilities

The definition of learning disability has varied over time, across jurisdictions and among disciplines. Among the definitions given to the concept, the one found in (Henry, H.J, 2009): *Learning Disabilities refer to a number of conditions that might affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who*

*otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning. As such, learning disabilities are distinct from global intellectual disabilities.*

Learning disabilities result from impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering or learning. These include, but are not limited to language processing, phonological processing, visual spatial processing, processing speed, memory, attention and executive functions (e.g. planning and decision making).

Learning disabilities vary in severity and may interfere with the acquisition and the use of one or more of the following:

- (1) oral language (e.g., listening, speaking, understanding) .
- (2) reading (e.g., decoding, phonetic knowledge, word recognition, comprehension)
- .
- (3) written language (e.g., spelling and written expression) .
- (4) mathematics (e.g., computation, problem solving) .

Learning disabilities may also involve difficulties with organizational skills, social perception, social interaction and perspective taking.

Learning disabilities are life-long. The way in which they are expressed may vary over an individual's lifetime, depending on the interaction between the demands of the environment and the individual's strengths and needs. Learning disabilities are suggested by unexpected academic under-achievement or achievement that is maintained only by unusually high levels of effort and support.

Unlike many other disabilities, identifying a learning disability poses some particular challenges since processing disorders are assessed through inference based on student responses. It might not be obvious that a student's learning difficulties are due to a learning disability.

The specific needs of individuals with learning disabilities change and evolve throughout their lifetime. This does not mean that the disability no longer exists, but by varying the activities they undertake and the strategies they develop to address their particular learning disabilities, students may experience different challenges at different times (Philips, L et al, 1991: 54).

## **1.2 Features of Specific Disabilities and Implications for Learning Foreign Languages**

In this sub-title the behavioral characteristics of some types of disabilities as well as their implications for learning foreign languages are described. This description is necessary for foreign language teachers who have not been specifically trained in special education. The following will help teachers plan a course or syllabus of instruction when teaching students with those types of special needs. Accordingly, teachers are to adapt the material and teaching methods and

techniques to the specific needs of the individual student, taking into account the desires and wants of the learners and insert them in the curriculum.

Types of disabilities can be classified as follows:

(1) visual impairments (2) auditory impairments (3) physical disabilities (4) behavioral disabilities (5) social – emotional disabilities (6) pervasive developmental disorders (6) slight or moderate cognitive developmental delay (Gajar, 1987: 329).

In this context, the focus will be on two (02) sorts of disabilities: visual impairments, and auditory impairments.

### **1.2.1 Visual Impairments**

This type of learning disability is the focus of the present study. Visual impairment is caused by deficiencies in the visual system (the eye and its parts and the optic nerve). Such deficiency cannot be repaired with the help of regular eyeglasses or contact lenses. This deficiency can be measured by visual acuity and the field of vision. Blindness, can be determined by the following parameters: total absence of sight, and maximum sharpness of vision of 3/60 in the healthier eye.

Totally blind or visually-impaired students require adaptation of foreign languages syllabuses. Those in the latter category require enlarged or bold type texts. The totally blind requires the written text in Braille. It is also important to make optimal use of auditory and kinesthetic modalities. Additionally, this type of students may use technology, listening to CDs, special aids for enlarging the written text, such as a magnifying glass and closed circuit television or a computer with a Braille screen.

### **1.2.2 Auditory Impairments**

Deaf students and students who have severe difficulties in hearing are typically limited in their ability to acquire language aurally, even when using hearing aid. Due to the auditory damage, the spoken language is only grasped in part and much is missed. In a noisy environment, crowded classes, the problem is more severe, as the noise blocks out the sounds of speech.

Aural exposure of students with auditory impairment to foreign languages is very limited or nonexistent. Lip reading does not offer a solution as it requires extensive knowledge of the language, including its vocabulary and grammatical structures, that is obviously lacking in the first stages of language acquisition.

In the process of teaching, among the steps that should be taken: the use of visual teaching aids extensively, speaking clearly, slowly and if necessary paraphrasing, etc.

### **1.3 Teachers' Roles and Appropriate Instructional Methods**

Teachers have a key role in implementing the curriculum. However, in many cases the curriculum excludes learners with special needs specifications. Teachers

who teach students with foreign language learning difficulties are faced with numerous challenges. Ganschow and Schneider (2006) state that training and education for foreign language teachers usually prepares them for the “ideal learner” who is expected to master language skills (pronunciation, reading, writing, speaking and listening) through exposure and practice. They point out the need for additional training in meeting the needs of students with special needs. Foreign language teachers should learn to determine the most beneficial accommodations for their students, and to identify students at risk of developing a foreign language learning disability as early as possible (Maja, 2016: 469).

Research regarding students with disabilities in the foreign language learning environment has concentrated on potential modifications and accommodations that should be made available (Arries, 1999: 91).

Thus, it is critical for teachers to understand that "the curriculum is not immovable [...] to which students with disabilities have to gain access. It is there to be changed [...] to include all students" (Mary Cathlin, 2015: 48).

While modifications and accommodations allow for increased access to a predetermined curriculum, a truly inclusive education calls for alterations to both the curriculum and the instructional practices at a macro level so as to allow all students, with each of their specific needs in mind, to gain access in a meaningful and purposeful way to the content and to develop the requisite language skills and cultural understandings.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Research Questions**

The aim of the study is to introduce the situation in foreign language education of learners with special educational needs at the University of Hamma Lakhdar, El-oued, Algeria. In order to achieve this aim, the present study seeks to answer the following key questions:

- 1) How is foreign language education ‘of learners with special educational needs’ dealt with by teachers, and syllabus designers in the Algerian context ?
- 2) What type of foreign languages syllabuses are offered ‘to learners with special educational needs’ in Algeria?
- 3) Are the needs, wants, and lacks of students with disabilities taken into account when designing foreign languages syllabuses ?
- 4) What professional and methodological support is provided to teachers of foreign languages dealing with learners with special needs?

### **2.2 Sampling and Data Gathering Tools**

Seeking to achieve the aims of the study, two semi-structured interviews have been administered to both students and teachers. Six (06) teachers divided

equally between English and French in addition to two (02) blind students have been chosen. The study was conducted during the academic year 2016/2017 at the Department of English and French at the University of Hamma Lakhdar in El-Oued, Algeria.

### **2.3. Description of the Data Gathering Tools**

#### **2.3.1 Description of Students' Interview**

Students' semi-structured interview comprises twenty four (24) questions centered around the following axes:

- The scores of students in the foreign language subjects.
- The degree of satisfaction of the targeted students towards the current foreign language syllabus.
- The nature of difficulties encountered by the targeted students in learning foreign languages.
- Investigating the lacks, needs and wants of the learners with special needs.
- Students' views towards materials used in the foreign language course.

#### **2.3.2 Description of Teachers' Interview**

Teachers' semi-structured interview comprises twenty questions. The questions used, and asked include the following broad lines:

- The academic degree, qualifications, experience and job status.
- The type of English or French taught by teachers to the targeted students: general (as ordinary students) or specific (responds to the needs of students with disabilities).
- The learners' needs, lacks, and wants whether taken into consideration or not when designing foreign languages' courses.
- The level of the students' motivation, attendance, and achievement to the foreign language course in relation to the variable of designing foreign language course on the basis of learners' special needs.
- The type of materials used and the basis of the selection of these materials.
- The techniques of teaching the four language skills (Listening, speaking, reading, and writing) to learners' with visual impairments .

### **3. Analysis and Discussion of the Research Findings**

The purpose of the present study is to identify the language needs of the students with special needs at the Departments of Foreign Languages in the University of Hamma Lakhdar, El-oued, Algeria. It attempts to examine to what extent the course being offered addresses learners with disabilities needs and to discover how students rate their competence in particular skills related to their academic specialty. Meanwhile, it tries to identify student's difficulties in learning foreign languages.

The results of this study show that foreign languages syllabuses offered to the targeted students do not meet their academic needs.

Foreign languages syllabuses should meet the needs of this special group of learners. Designing an appropriate foreign language course that suits the target group in an academic setting is not an easy task for course designers and foreign languages' teachers. The present study attempts to investigate foreign languages' needs of the targeted students in order to facilitate the process of preparing appropriate courses attached to their special needs.

The findings of the present study revealed that the current foreign languages' teaching traditions at the University of Hamma Lakhdar in El-oued treat learners with special needs as ordinary students. No special considerations are given to this type of learners. No modifications or adaptation are inserted. Thus, some recommendations and pedagogical implications that should be included in the current foreign languages' syllabuses are given.

#### **4. Recommendations and Pedagogical Implications**

Schools and universities have the responsibility to provide a broad and balanced curriculum for all students. This is more than just giving students 'access to the curriculum'. The curriculum is not immovable, like some building, to which students with special needs or disabilities have to gain access. It is there to be changed, where necessary, to include all students.

In order to set out a framework for modifying the curriculum to include all students,. Teachers and curriculum developers have to: set suitable learning challenges, respond to students' diverse learning needs, and overcome potential barriers to learning and assessment for particular individuals and groups of students. These principles allow teachers to choose objectives for students with disabilities that are different from those of the rest of the group, or modify the curriculum to remove barriers so all students meet the same objectives.

Planning for students with special needs should be part of the planning that teachers do for all students, rather than a separate activity.

Here is a list of basic intuitive strategies that can be adopted by teachers to promote foreign language development (Tough 225-226):

- teaching language in concrete situations that students are involved in;
- slow speech with a high pitched voice addressed to individual child;
- clear articulation, often repetition of single words and their simple, well-formed, colloquial utterances;
- starting from single words through their combination to formulaic phrases;
- when wrongly named an object or action, then provide quick appropriate name, repetition and indication of the object to demonstrate the reference;

- giving students time to listen and prepare their answer (let them complete the idea);
- responding with a reformulation of students' ill-formed utterance helps children stimulates to think about the ill-formed structure.

### **Conclusion**

Teaching foreign languages to learners with special educational needs has become one of the top challenges of contemporary foreign language education and its methodology. It is the main reason why future and in-practice teachers should be well informed about various special educational needs and the principles how to teach and support learners with special needs in foreign language classes.

Students with disabilities have the same right to learn foreign languages in school as ordinary students do. With the appropriate professional support and teaching methods, students with disabilities are indeed capable of learning foreign languages. This assumption led to the adaptation of the foreign languages' curriculum for the benefit of students with disabilities who require adaptive teaching, whether in a special education framework or within the regular school system.

The results showed that while much attention are given to the students with disabilities by both teachers and educational institutions for the development of foreign language education of the target group, the existing situation at schools and universities is not very optimistic. The results also pointed to the areas in which a set of important measures need to be adopted. Information on teaching learners with special needs should be integrated in all pre-service and in-service teacher training programs. The appropriate evaluation instruments for the objective evaluation of learners with special needs should be designed and validated as soon as possible. What is needed even more is theoretical sources, teaching materials, and practical handbooks, as well as other measures that would lead to the fulfillment of the general aim: to improve foreign language education of learners with disabilities while keeping the appropriate demandingness and attractiveness of foreign language education of mainstream learners in the same classroom.

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