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**Differentiation in the foreign language classroom: including students with  
disabilities in secondary foreign language classes.**

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**Differentiation in the foreign language classroom: including students with  
disabilities in secondary foreign language classes.**

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## **Dedication**

To Charles and Susan Trawick, whose constant and consistent love and support have gotten me through the challenges of two degrees and teacher training.

Thanks, Mom and Dad, for giving me both an education and a heart for others.

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**Differentiation in the foreign language classroom: including students with disabilities in secondary foreign language classes.**

by

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

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Foreign language teachers are not generally given information about how to work with students with disabilities. However, it is important for these students to have access to FL classes, both for the cognitive benefits that they offer and for path to higher education. This report offers my reflections on how to differentiate instruction in foreign language reading and writing to students with disabilities as well as typically developing students. I believe that both groups will benefit from the practices I describe here.

Keywords: foreign language education; students with disabilities; learning disabilities; ADHD; inclusion; differentiation.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	v
Abstract.....	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction and Key Concepts.....	1
Chapter 2: Differentiating FL Reading.....	3
2.1 Problems that all students may have with FL reading.....	4
2.1.1 Syntax and grammar.....	5
2.1.2 Teaching phonics.....	6
2.1.3 Vocabulary, Context, and Glossing.....	7
2.1.4 Developing Vocabulary.....	9
2.2 Challenges Specific to Students with Disabilities.....	10
2.2.1 Working Memory.....	11
2.2.2 Processing Difficulties.....	12
2.3 Non-reading challenges.....	14
2.3.1 Scaffolding.....	14
2.3.2 Breaks.....	15
2.3.3 Motivation.....	16
2.4 Conclusion.....	17
Chapter 3: Differentiating FL Writing.....	18
3.1 General Problems with L2 Writing.....	18
3.1.1 Planning and Organization.....	19
3.1.2 Sentence Formulation and Translation.....	21
3.1.3 Vocabulary and Circumlocution.....	23
3.2 Challenges Specific to Students with Disabilities.....	24
3.2.1 LD and Assistive Technology.....	25
3.2.2 Working Memory and Writing.....	26
3.2.3 Executive Function and Strategy Instruction.....	27
3.3 Conclusion.....	28
Chapter 4: Conclusion and Further Research.....	29

Bibliography ..... 31



## **Chapter 1: Introduction and Key Concepts**

Though many studies about how to teach reading, writing, speaking, or listening to foreign language (FL) learners exist, very few researchers address the challenges of language learning for students with disabilities. What research exists focuses exclusively on students with learning disabilities (LD), attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or foreign language learning disability (and whether or not such a disability exists), with more focus on reading and writing than on speaking and listening.

All this said, why should FL teachers even consider teaching students with disabilities? To start, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that all students with disabilities receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)—and they must not be denied that education (Harkin, 1990). However, many students with disabilities do not complete FL courses. According to Shifrer, Callahan, and Muller (2013), only 26% of students with LD complete one high school credit in a FL; 79% of other students meet this criterion. Because FL credits are often required for both graduation and college admission, students with LD who are advised not to take FL classes or fail these courses due to insufficient accommodation are at a disadvantage if they seek postsecondary education (Kleinert et al., 2007).

Perhaps even more importantly, FL instruction can both improve a student's first language (L1) proficiency and increase a student's "sensitivity toward cultural and diversity differences [ . . . ] while enabling [the student] to understand the perspective and

value of the other culture” (Kleinert et al., 2007, p. 25). Students with disabilities lose out on these benefits when excluded from or tracked out of FL classes. Because of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, “educators must ensure that all students have the opportunity to participate and progress in the general curriculum” (Kleinert et al., 2007, p. 24); why, then, do educators so often discourage students from taking FL courses that could be of benefit whether or not the students achieve and maintain proficiency? Many of the best practices for teaching students with disabilities are, in fact, best practices for teaching all students; accommodating lessons to include a student with disabilities may be advantageous to every student (Duvall, 2006).

In this report, I seek to offer a practical guide to including students with LD and ADHD in the FL classroom. In addition, I will describe specific activities I have used in my own German teaching that I believe may be helpful for all second- or foreign-language students. Due to a lack of available resources, I will only address reading and writing challenges in FL teaching and disabilities; speaking, listening, behavior, and foreign language learning disability lie outside the scope of this report.

I will be using some specific terms in this report. When referring to a foreign language, I may use L2, FL, or TL, standing in for second language, foreign language, and target language, respectively; I will use them more or less interchangeably. L1 indicates a student’s first language. LD and ADHD represent learning disabilities and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

## **Chapter 2: Differentiating FL Reading**

Although students generally learn to read in their first language at the primary-school level, “questions regarding how exactly to formulate, deliver, sustain, and manage secondary-level interventions remain to be addressed” for learners with disabilities at the secondary-school level (Kamps & Greenwood, 2005, p. 500). That is to say, if diagnosed with any kind of reading disability during the elementary school years, many students receive some kind of individualized help in catching up to their peers. However, if by middle or high school a student still lags behind his or her peers’ reading abilities, that student is less likely to receive help, either relying much more heavily on dedicated English-Language Arts teachers or simply falling behind. However, with foreign-language courses frequently beginning at the middle- or high-school level, students have a new opportunity to work on their reading comprehension skills without appearing inferior to their classmates.

So what problems is a foreign-language teacher likely to encounter with his or her students’ reading abilities? Students’ disabilities may manifest in phonics, vocabulary, working memory deficits, difficulty focusing, or difficulty interpreting the symbols on the page. Some of these challenges must be addressed individually, with accommodations for the students and modifications to physical texts and assignments. However, several of these problems can lead a teacher to methods that will be beneficial to all students as they learn to read in the new target language.

## **2.1 Problems that all students may have with FL reading**

Because of differences in declension and syntax among languages, most students need to relearn how to read when studying a new language: though there is often some transfer of knowledge and skill, that does not account for the entire L2 reading process (Grabe, 2012). In German, for example, word position does not influence meaning the way it does in English. Declined names and conjugated verbs indicate the subject and objects of the sentence to the reader; the verb either takes second position in a declarative sentence or goes at the end, depending on the type of clause. As a result, a student must not only take a clause holistically, but also must remember the rules that govern declension and conjugation. For students who already know how to read in English and understand, either explicitly or implicitly, the rules governing English syntax, encountering an entirely new grammatical system can be both difficult and intimidating. For a student who has trouble with reading comprehension in his or her native language, a new system may feel downright impossible.

By employing some simple strategies, however, reading in the target language can become much more accessible for all students. Many students will likely require a measure of explicit knowledge—elements specifically taught to the students to enhance their reading abilities. Explicit learning—vocabulary definitions, intentional noticing, reading strategies, phonics, and syntactic structure, for example—is considered a lower-level reading process, but is seen as necessary to the development of more implicit reading skills (Grabe, 2012). Although some students will require less explicit teaching

of such reading skills, most students will likely need them to some extent, and class time should be used to help students develop their abilities.

### **2.1.1 Syntax and grammar**

Syntax and grammar, as already mentioned, can be significant roadblocks to learning to read in the L2. To a proficient speaker of the target language, they are almost second nature, and can therefore be very difficult to teach. However, by providing students examples of correct syntax and giving them opportunities to formulate their own sentences, both independently and based on models, students will have the chance to work out syntax on their own while also opening the door to explicit teaching by error correction.

I use daily warm-ups as sentence teaching opportunities. I give my students four questions related to the unit topic, which they can work on individually or with a neighbor before the whole class comes together to go over the possible answers. As seen below, these questions demonstrate vocabulary and sentence structures that the students may incorporate into their answers.

Question: *Wie lange dauert die ideale Reise?* (How long does the ideal trip last?)

Possible correct answer: *Die ideale Reise dauert 10 Tage.* (The ideal trip lasts 10 days.)

In this example, the students must only adjust word order to create a statement with an answer to the question, showing that they understand the question word “*wie*” (“how”) in the process. If a student makes an error in answering the question, writing “*Dauert die*

*ideale Reise 10 Tage*” (Lasts the ideal trip 10 days), the teacher can gently correct the student in a whole-class setting, allowing the student to self-correct before the teacher goes on to explicitly teaching about word order in questions and statements.

Though translation is not typically used in a FL education setting (Horwitz, 2013), I use it in class to demonstrate the differences between L1 and L2 syntax and grammar. Because students have a tendency to translate word-for-word from their L1 into the target language and vice versa, giving them translation exercises serves to demonstrate that such a method often produces incorrect or unclear statements in the TL. However, such exercises should come with a disclaimer: students need to notice the difference between translation and writing in the TL, as well as the thinking processes that differentiate the two.

Through these writing exercises, students can practice using the target language’s syntax and increase their understanding while reading in the target language. Where syntax may interfere with students’ reading comprehension, practicing syntax in short writing exercises gives them greater understanding of how the system works.

### **2.1.2 Teaching phonics**

Most language learners will face challenges with an unfamiliar phonetic system. For students whose first language is English, accents on letters are likely to cause some confusion, and new consonant clusters may make reading an intimidating prospect, whether silently or aloud; take the German word “*Angstschweiß*,” for example. A compound word meaning “anxiety sweat,” such a word has eight consecutive consonants

and a new letter, the *eszett*, or sharp *S*, making syllabic division difficult for a beginning learner and meaning hard to interpret. In addition to the *eszett*, one must also know that a German *w* sounds like an English *v* to recognize the word “*Schweiß*” as the word meaning “sweat” in English.

Knowing that one must translate letters into phonemes, how, then, can teachers convey this knowledge to their students? In languages with phonemic alphabets like English, German, French, Spanish, Latin, Hindi, and Hebrew, or languages with syllabic alphabets, like Japanese, Cherokee, and Thai, one must only learn which character aligns with each sound.

Thus, teachers need to spend time explicitly teaching students the phonetic system of the TL (Arries, 1999). Though this task is time consuming, such lessons are integral for what Ganschow and Sparks (1995) refer to as students who are at risk “for experiencing problems with learning a foreign language” (p. 107). This type of lesson should benefit students who “cannot identify sounds that their instructor utters,” thus receiving “little or no comprehensible input” (Arries, 1999, p. 101).

### **2.1.3 Vocabulary, Context, and Glossing**

In a new language, it is easy to get frustrated by having to look up many words in order to understand a short paragraph. Even students who are strong readers in their L1 will be inclined to use a dictionary whenever they come across an unfamiliar word—a process that often derails reading fluency and renders the entire reading experience incredibly tedious (Grabe, 2012). Therefore, students need to learn to read for the gist of

the passage and develop other skills in order to enhance their comprehension of the text's main ideas. While teaching these skills and strategies to students without disabilities, a teacher may also encourage students who have disabilities and/or difficulty reading to adopt such strategies, spending extra time with them and scaffolding as needed.

The difficulty level of a reading text is also an important issue. By providing students with texts that are on their level, a teacher may encourage them to read for the main idea—focus on the major concept and not worry too much about individual vocabulary words. Including a glossary for important but unfamiliar vocabulary in the text should also aid students' comprehension (Grabe, 2012). Depending on the difficulty level of the text, the medium of the text (digital or paper, for example), and the ability levels of the students, the teacher may adapt the type of glossary to fit the students' needs. A glossary that uses images may not only be best for students with disabilities who might have trouble with using multiple languages at once, but may also benefit students without disabilities as they begin to rely less on their L1 vocabulary in their L2 (Chun & Plass, 1996). Multimedia tools are of great benefit to students: electronic glosses—digital glossaries that occur alongside a text instead of as an appendix to it—encourage noticing and can aid students with reading comprehension (Yanguas, 2009). Some programs even allow students to gloss text themselves, like eComma, wherein students can gloss words with text, images, or videos. In his research on learning with multiple media, Mayer (2003) points out that “students who listen to (or read) explanations that are presented solely as words are unable to remember most of the key ideas and experience difficulty in using what was presented to solve new problems” (p.



126)—that holds true for both students with disabilities and typically developing students. By presenting text alongside images or animations, learners have an opportunity to develop a much deeper and more complex grasp of the material, able to manipulate both the vocabulary and the concept for creative purposes (Mayer, 2003).

In addition, by glossing a text, either digitally or on paper, the students will not need to look up unfamiliar vocabulary in an additional text or database, thus disrupting the reading process. Reading exercises can be further developed through challenging students to use context to gloss the vocabulary. Although this method is not reliable for vocabulary development (Grabe, 2012), it may help to show students what vocabulary is necessary for text comprehension and challenge them to use skills they already have in order to understand new words and ideas.

#### **2.1.4 Developing Vocabulary**

Vocabulary in general is often challenging for students to develop. According to Grabe (2012), “vocabulary learning needs to be developed from a combination of direct vocabulary instruction, vocabulary-learning strategies, extensive reading and word learning from context, heightened student awareness of new words, and motivation to use and collect words” (p. 283). In other words, students need to want to learn new terms in the L2 and generally need a great amount of exposure to new vocabulary in a variety of contexts. This holds true for typically developing students as well as students with disabilities—perhaps even more so for students with disabilities, because they often have short-term and working-memory difficulties (Arries, 1999).

As I mentioned above, glossing texts is a straightforward method of supporting vocabulary development. With a variety of input methods—verbal, visual, and even motor (Total Physical Response, for example)—students are more likely to grasp a vocabulary concept (Leons, Herbert, & Gobbo, 2009). Repetition of a word or concept allows multiple opportunities for all students to understand (Cook, 2008).

Students may also glean new vocabulary and find motivation in extensive input—but they must first be aware of and willing to notice new words (Grabe, 2012). A teacher can instruct students in noticing strategies, such as keeping a vocabulary journal, highlighting unknown words in a text, or jotting down new words during a listening activity (or marking heard words on a handout). The development of effective vocabulary learning strategies is also very important. A teacher in an inclusive environment can aid students in finding effective strategies by providing a variety of input methods and encouraging students to set goals and find what works for them as individuals.

## **2.2 Challenges Specific to Students with Disabilities**

Although the above methods can be very helpful in the development of reading skills, students with LD and ADHD will have additional challenges with reading in class. These difficulties arise with poor working memory—keeping information “on-line” long enough to use it (Leons, Herbert, & Gobbo, 2009)—and the organization of text on the page. The extra time often allotted to students with LD or ADHD in order to finish assignments and strategy instruction may help alleviate some of the difficulties that students with reading disabilities may experience.

In an inclusive classroom, the teacher is responsible for providing materials and activities that accommodate the needs of the students with disabilities, working in conjunction with special educators. As daunting as this task may be, many adjustments are much more simple than they may initially appear.

### **2.2.1 Working Memory**

Students with LD, ADHD, and brain trauma often have difficulty with tasks requiring working memory (Arries, 1999; Jeffries & Everatt, 2004). In their study on working memory and the role it plays in dyslexia and other learning disabilities, Jeffries and Everatt (2004) found that students with dyslexia had marked difference in rhyming accuracy, among other activities, compared to students without LD. This finding indicates phonological deficits among students with LD (Jeffries & Everatt, 2004); one way to help students improve their phonological processing is to explicitly teach and practice the L2 phonetic code, as mentioned above.

Ashbaker and Swanson (1996) also recommend simple repetition and item association to help adolescent readers with LD (as cited in Arries, 1999). Arries (1999) also points out that students with memory difficulties have a hard time internalizing vocabulary without explicit instruction and grammar without contextualized practice. Because of these difficulties, the teacher needs to be prepared to supplement textbooks with a variety of strategies (Arries, 1999).

Leons, Herbert, and Gobbo (2009) state, “Students [with working memory difficulties] find it challenging, for example, to simultaneously retrieve needed

vocabulary, conjugate verbs, and think about appropriate word order” (p. 45). Within reading specifically, working memory difficulties manifest in vocabulary, syntax, and grammar, just as they would with speaking and listening. However, because reading can be conducted at a student’s own pace, additional resources can be made available to aid students when memory falls short.

### **2.2.2 Processing Difficulties**

Students with dyslexia and other reading-related learning disabilities will have marked difficulties processing any texts. These disabilities may manifest in difficulty decoding written language or in a reduced ability to comprehend a text’s main ideas or important details, as well as difficulty with concentration, note-taking, and time management (Mortimore & Crozier, 2006).

Difficulties in processing may mean that a student with LD and/or ADHD will need additional time to complete assigned work; many students with ADHD and LD are eligible to receive extra time on assignments, thus allowing students to take necessary breaks and process the material that they may be slow to get through. However, it is important to note that a student who receives extra time in his or her FL class is highly likely to have the same accommodation in his or her core classes, which may lead to an insurmountable amount of work for the student. For example, a student who requires half again as much time as a typically developing student to read and comprehend an expository text, given three one-hour reading assignments, would need at least four and a half hours to complete all the reading. To any teenager, 4.5 hours of homework on a

school night or weekend day is a lengthy commitment; a student for whom reading is a constant struggle may simply find it too daunting and fall behind, thus digging a hole that is impossible to climb out of.

As a result, FL teachers need to prioritize. As an elective but vital course—without the status of core classes—students are less likely to make their FL course a priority. Teachers must decide what knowledge is most necessary to convey. Is the text expository, with information to be discussed in class? Thus, I suggest providing a listening activity instead, something that can be listened to multiple times in a relatively short period. Alternately, teachers may provide a shorter text at a lower reading level that will communicate main ideas efficiently. When the activity meant to assess reading comprehension, teachers can provide explicit instructions in the student’s L1 and scaffold the activity with prompts and context clues.

With awareness of what is being assessed, a teacher can organize activities to work on those specific skills. When teachers are not assessing a student’s ability to understand instructions in the TL on a written assignment, they can provide instructions in the L1. By shortening or otherwise altering reading assignments for students who need extra time, the teacher can avoid discouraging those students with extra work.

With regard to strategy instruction, it is important to explicitly teach what strategies to use and when to use them. Berkeley, Mastropieri, and Scruggs (2011) found that “students with disabilities who were explicitly taught how to summarize main ideas

[the primary strategy taught in the study] were able to apply that knowledge to a similar article in a testing situation” (p. 29).

## **2.3 Non-reading challenges**

In addition to problems that are specific to reading, many students, both typically developing and those with disabilities, have difficulty with certain classroom experiences. In this section, I will address issues such as scaffolding, breaks, and motivation, all of which are needed in more than one area of L2 instruction; they are relevant in writing, speaking, and listening, as well. These adaptations should prove beneficial for all students.

### **2.3.1 Scaffolding**

Scaffolding, or the “process that assists the learner in getting to the next point in development” (Cook, 2008, p. 228) often gets students to the next step of the learning process or otherwise helps the students make connections that they need in order to fully comprehend a concept or text. The idea of scaffolding draws on the theory of well-known psychologist Lev Vygotsky: the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In his discussion of second language acquisition’s sociocultural theory, Cook (2008) explains the ZPD as the extent to which a learner can comprehend and process new information; scaffolding extends the ZPD by assisting the learner with an information gap. For example, when discussing a text about a cultural practice, the students may brainstorm what they already know about that cultural practice, or about similar practices in their own culture.

Even for a teacher who is proficient in the L2, scaffolding takes practice; it is easy to assume that students will catch on to and understand a topic just by reading about it. However, by adding additional steps to the reading process (or any other process), the teacher can save him- or herself many questions and misunderstandings. To scaffold the reading process, a teacher may want to discuss the vocabulary in the text, brainstorm with students about the topic of the text, ask questions about what they already know or think about the topic of the text, or otherwise activate background knowledge; it may be helpful to consider what proficiency level the students have, as well as their prior knowledge.

With writing, scaffolding may include structured prewriting activities, like brainstorming or free writing, as well as a discussion of what vocabulary might be relevant to the students' writing. Students' revision of their writing will also need scaffolding, perhaps with a demonstration using a sample text or a guided handout.

### **2.3.2 Breaks**

Depending on the length of class periods, students may need opportunities to stand up and move around during a lesson. Because they spend much of a seven-hour school day sitting down at tables or desks, students may grow tired, bored, and lethargic. By incorporating activities that allow students to move or by simply including a stretch break, teachers may help their students re-focus on the task at hand.

Breaks may be even more helpful for students with disabilities, who may find the work discouraging or have trouble paying attention for extended periods of time. Incorporating breaks or motion-related activities will give them an opportunity to release

pent-up energy or let their minds wander for a moment before they need to get back to work.

### **2.3.3 Motivation**

A student's motivation is perhaps most important to the language-learning process. Because L2 learners can already communicate with others (unlike children learning their L1, who need language to be understood), particularly in a FL class—as opposed to students with a variety of L1s in an English as a second language course—they do not need an L2 to communicate meaning; what then will motivate them?

Horwitz (2013) suggests several ways of increasing student motivation in the FL classroom: helping students set personal goals, discussing students' attitudes toward the target language and culture, helping students connect with members of the TL community (and supporting them as they develop those connections), and encouraging student autonomy, for example. Students who are motivated by high school credit and college admission may need some guidance in order to become more intrinsically motivated in their language course (Horwitz, 2013).

Also worth noting is the circular nature of motivation: “High motivation is one factor that causes successful learning; in reverse, successful learning causes high motivation” (Cook, 2008, p. 139). Incorporating student interests using discussion topics and course materials can encourage a student to engage in the class, thus increasing performance and motivation (Cook, 2008). In addition, by mentioning successful L2 users from history and popular culture (i.e. Gandhi, Marie Curie, and Michael



Fassbender), students may see that people who are good in their fields have found avenues to use multiple languages in their professional and personal lives (Cook, 2008).

## **2.4 Conclusion**

Many factors influence L2 reading for both typically developing students and students with disabilities. More than anything, a FL class that incorporates reading must consider the needs of the specific students in the course. By adapting instruction to student needs, selecting texts that will engage the students, and providing the resources necessary for the students' reading processes from the very beginning, a teacher can help students improve their reading skills in both their L1 and their L2.

## **Chapter 3: Differentiating FL Writing**

At the secondary level, most students are still developing their writing skills in their L1. Many are simultaneously learning a second language; even these students can express themselves through their writing in the TL. However, in order to do this, the teacher must teach them how. While some skills may transfer from the L1, the different writing conventions of the TL will likely cause trouble, as will a student's limited TL vocabulary and grammar knowledge.

In this chapter, I will briefly discuss how to differentiate writing instruction in a foreign language class. This chapter will include information about specific challenges for both typically developing students and students with disabilities. As with reading, a teacher including students with disabilities is likely to encounter difficulties with working memory and executive function, as well as challenges with spelling and organization of thoughts and writing (Reid, Hagaman, & Graham, 2014; Williams, 2005).

### **3.1 General Problems with L2 Writing**

As students learn to speak a FL, they will most likely have opportunities to write it as well. However, as they begin to write more than dialogues, and as they read a wider variety of texts, the students will realize that there are more kinds of FL writing than the transcription of written speech. With a variety of text styles, students can learn about and produce a greater range of writing: from travel brochures to five-paragraph essays and beyond.

In this section, I will discuss common challenges of L2 writing, including text organization, sentence formation, revising, and vocabulary and diction. Other challenges will arise, but these difficulties arise across the board, even among more proficient and experienced writers.

### **3.1.1 Planning and Organization**

Almost all writers experience difficulty with organizing their thoughts at one point or another. Whether writing fiction, nonfiction, or poetry, a writer must organize his or her thoughts and the message he or she wishes to convey in order to create a coherent and fluid text.

However, to students learning to write in any language, it is important for them to learn organizational strategies; while some students will have a natural knack for text organization, many will need a teacher to guide them and teach them writing strategies (Williams, 2005). Prewriting activities can provide students with a variety of ways to organize, demonstrating how some strategies pair more appropriately with particular writing prompts than with others. Students may also find that one organizational technique meshes with their learning style better than another. Thus, the teacher may wish to provide strategy training initially and then allow students to use whichever method suits them. This option is not without caveats: students with ADHD or LD may have difficulty discerning which strategies are most appropriate for a given assignment (Berkeley, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2011). Thus, the teacher should either suggest a planning strategy for each writing assignment or “explicitly teach students how to

determine when a particular strategy might be effective” (Berkeley, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2011, p. 19).

Effective strategies may include written outlines, timed free-writing activities, graphic organizers like mind maps, and jotted lists (Williams, 2005). The type of writing exercise should influence the recommended writing strategies; a more structured organizational system may be needed for a very specific topic, but some topics may require a student to find a subject before real planning can begin. Williams (2005) gives examples of both open-ended prompts and specific prompts, indicating “invention techniques” as potential strategies (p. 78): looping and free writing both require high levels of writing fluency, but unstructured brainstorming—particularly in a whole-class setting—can also help L2 learners develop the topic (Williams, 2005).

For more specific prompts, it may be helpful for students to ask questions in order to begin their writing. Williams (2005) suggests, “Write an essay describing an experience in which you were the object of a stereotype or prejudice. [ . . . ] Compare your experience to the one described in the story we read in class” (p. 77) as a potential topic, but any prompt eliciting a more detailed explanation or analysis will do. This strategy will require heavy scaffolding from the instructor until students are able to formulate questions independently. Initially, they may have difficulty coming up with questions like, “What is a stereotype? How does it differ from prejudice?” and “What was the author’s point?” (Williams, 2005, pp. 79-80). As the students practice formulating and answering questions, they should become able to perform these tasks more

independently; however, a teacher still needs to remain aware of the needs of students who have difficulty with strategy implementation.

An additional challenge of the writing process is revision: How does a teacher convey the methods of revision? Many students will initially approach revision as proofreading; students with LD will especially have difficulty moving forward from proofreading to true revision (Gillespie & Graham, 2014). Learners who have spent considerable time and effort in producing a text in the TL can be initially resistant to pulling their writing apart and putting it back together (Williams, 2005). In particular, students with LD tend to approach writing as the process of content generation, but little more; they “experience difficulty coordinating the processes involved in skilled revision, including evaluating text, making decisions about what to change, and executing a plan for the proposed changes” (Graham, 1997, as cited in Gillespie and Graham, 2014, p. 455). As a result, teachers of writing must teach the revision process and give students the opportunity to practice it, with the aid of reference materials if necessary.

### **3.1.2 Sentence Formulation and Translation**

In my experience, FL learners are easily frustrated by their difficulty expressing themselves in the TL. Some students, accustomed to expressing themselves through writing in their L1, may circumvent the challenge of using the TL by making up cognates and basing sentence structure on their L1.

As Williams (2005) points out, “L2 writers are at a considerable disadvantage in that they are expected to start producing complex, high-quality writing relatively quickly

in a language they have not yet fully mastered” (p. 12). As a teacher, one must acknowledge this disadvantage while simultaneously encouraging students to meet high expectations. However, because most writing does not occur in real-time contexts—that is, writing typically involves planning and revision—the writer can take time to refine his or her output, thus raising expectations beyond communication to incorporate a necessary level of accuracy (Williams, 2005).

In order for a student to acquire the language necessary to produce written output, extensive input is required—particularly written input (Williams, 2005). Williams writes, “Reading takes on special significance as input because written language is not simply spoken language written down (p. 5). Thus, in order to produce grammatical written output, students must receive plentiful grammatical input.

As indicated in the previous chapter, translation exercises can be an effective method of teaching students not to build sentences by translating word-for-word from their L1. Speaking from my own experience: before implementing translation exercises, I read a sentence produced by a precocious student: “*Ich gehe in ihre Schwesters Bäckerei*” (literally: I go to her sisters bakery). This sentence, though it communicates the sentiment, is not grammatical; it ought to read “*Ich gehe in die Bäckerei meiner Schwester*” (“I go to the bakery of her sister”). However, this grammatical sentence implements a grammar construction that the student had not yet learned. This anecdote raises the question: How does a teacher encourage students to use what they know, thus decreasing the likelihood of mistakes, without discouraging students from taking risks?

Correcting the mistake without penalizing the student can help the student explicitly understand a new grammar topic and still encourage the student to take risks with their language-learning; at the same time, the teacher needs to pay attention to the needs of the student (Hadley, 2001).

As a result, I found it useful to incorporate small translation exercises in my lessons. These exercises also served to remind students that German has no present progressive tense, and that they must use articles with every noun, whether or not they would include an article in the parallel English sentence. By incorporating this strategy, my students became more adept at noticing, and ask questions that furthered their growth as language learners. Their questions allowed me to give them information about which grammar topics to anticipate.

### **3.1.3 Vocabulary and Circumlocution**

Every time I write an essay in my L1 (English), I experience at least one moment in which I can't retrieve a word. If a friend is nearby, I ask him or her, "What's the word for...?"; if no one is around or I'm in a timed assessment environment, I sit and stare at the paper until I figure out which word I want or settle for a different word or phrase.

This challenge with word retrieval occurs every time that I, an English-speaking graduate student, sit down to write an essay, whether academic or not. For language learners, this occurs much more often, even for much less nuanced words. As with reading, looking up words can take time and interrupt writing fluency, but best practices for coaching writing vary depending on the type of written assignment. For timed-

writing assignments, limiting students' dictionary use may help increase their writing fluency and encourage them to practice circumlocution—finding another way to say what they mean when a specific word does not come to mind. For writing assignments intended for revision and polish, monitoring students' dictionary use may help them become more proficient in word retrieval and use of a multi-language dictionary.

### **3.2 Challenges Specific to Students with Disabilities**

When folks think about learning disabilities, most of them go straight to the one they have heard the most about: dyslexia. Based on my personal experience, dyslexia is perceived as a disorder in which letters and numbers switch places on the page, and spelling is affected, more so than reading. While these are symptoms of dyslexia, they fail to paint the whole picture. “Dyslexics of the world untie!” reads the popular bumper sticker.

However, other disabilities will affect a student's ability to write in the L2. As mentioned previously, students who have working memory difficulties due to ADHD, LD, traumatic brain injury, or other disabilities may struggle with remembering and processing information in a way that makes text production straightforward (Arries, 1999). Dyslexia and dysgraphia may contribute to difficulties forming characters and orderly lines of text (Gillespie & Graham, 2014). Students with ADHD or other disabilities that impair executive function will struggle with the goal-oriented nature of writer development (Reid, Hagaman, & Graham, 2014).



### **3.2.1 LD and Assistive Technology**

Students with LD are likely to experience difficulty with the transcription of their ideas onto page or screen. As Graham (2006) observed, the low-level transcription skills of students with writing difficulties—skills like handwriting, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation—may interfere with the more critical processes involved in writing. Students who have difficulty progressing past the basic transcription of ideas onto paper will be severely hampered if they wish to continue their academic education or succeed in business; Sundeen (2014) writes, “Students are expected to write effectively across content areas in order to be prepared for college and careers” (p.30); in order to do so, students with disabilities need to find a method of transcription that works for them.

The difficulty that students with disabilities have with writing may eventually cause them to dislike writing: the cognitive and physical struggle to produce written language alongside the time required lead to negative attitudes (Gillespie and Graham, 2014). In “A Meta-Analysis of Writing Interventions for Students with Learning Disabilities,” Gillespie and Graham (2014) note several ways of helping students with transcription problems: dictation, teaching typing and/or writing skills, explicitly teaching writing strategies, and scaffolding are all methods of accommodating a student’s needs. However, not all of these methods are practical within the context of a FL class.

After working with the entire FL class on character formation and writing strategies, it would be very time-consuming to meet the additional needs of students with learning disabilities with regard to transcription, particularly for a FL teacher who has

little to no training in writing interventions. As a result, other solutions are necessary. Dictation and oral examinations are practical responses; Gillespie and Graham (2014) found that “[s]tudents with LD who dictated their compositions into a tape recorder or to a scribe showed greater writing improvements than students who composed by hand” (p. 468). In this situation, the teacher should consult the student’s individualized education plan (IEP) and communicate with their school’s special education team to find the best solution.

### **3.2.2 Working Memory and Writing**

As with reading, students with working memory difficulties will need accommodations when writing. Allowing students to take their time and have materials on hand in order to aid the writing process may decrease the challenges associated with writing and working memory; if a student does not need to hold articles and cases in his or her mind while writing but can use additional aids, the writing process may be expedited.

Students with working memory difficulties who also experience challenges with transcription may have additional trouble with writing, because the added effort and attention required to write or type their text will likely cause them to forget what they were planning on writing or how to write it.

### **3.2.3 Executive Function and Strategy Instruction**

In their review of studies on self-regulated strategy development with students who have ADHD, Reid, Hagaman, and Graham (2014) discuss the impairment of executive function in these students. Executive functions are the cognitive processes that direct goal-oriented behaviors like planning and goal setting, as well as time-management, monitoring, flexibility, and attention (Reid, Hagaman, & Graham, 2014). As a result, some of these behaviors and strategies will need to be explicitly taught to students with disabilities, and some will have to be dealt with in other ways. For example, a student who has trouble paying attention to a writing assignment may need extra time to complete the task so that he or she may take breaks as needed.

Gillespie and Graham (2014) suggest that teaching goal setting and other strategies for planning, writing, and revising are effective interventions for students with LD. “Theoretically, the positive impact of goal setting in the studies reviewed here suggests students with LD possess greater capabilities for carrying out writing processes than they apply spontaneously,” Gillespie and Graham (2014) write, noting that the writing-related behaviors of these students improved as they practiced these skills. Although most of the studies that Gillespie and Graham (2014) analyzed were focused on primary and early secondary settings (usually up to grade 8), encouraging students in a high-school FL setting to set goals is an easy way to remind all students of the benefits of having learning goals, which may increase the motivation of some learners.

### **3.3 Conclusion**

Writing is a difficult skill to teach to any student, with or without disabilities, in their first language or their third. Each language has different writing conventions—for example, writers of English tend to avoid the passive voice in most contexts, but writers of German use it frequently at all levels of writing. In a FL class, then, the teacher is not only responsible for teaching the mechanics of writing in the TL, but also the target writing culture

Unfortunately, the research on teaching writing in a foreign language appears to be lacking information about vocabulary gaps in writing. While vocabulary gaps in spoken language can be overcome through other means, including cognates, gestures, mispronunciations, and body language, most of these avenues are unavailable to writers, yet I found little information regarding what strategies are most effective when an L2 writer comes across a vocabulary gap.

## **Chapter 4: Conclusion and Further Research**

With an increase in personal technology and resources, students with disabilities are attending institutes of higher education at an increasing rate (Mortimer & Crozier, 2006). Because many of those institutes have a foreign language requirement, these students must either obtain an exemption from the requirement or they must struggle through a semester or two of a language course that does not differentiate instruction (Arries, 1999). Although this report focuses primarily on secondary education, many of the same principles apply to the situation in higher education: courses are usually insufficiently differentiated to include students with disabilities, particularly those with LD.

By denying access to FL courses to students with disabilities at the secondary level, we are denying them a cultural education and knowledge that would work to their benefit in this rapidly globalizing world. Not only that, but we are also denying them the cognitive benefits that they would gain whether or not they developed or maintained proficiency in the TL. These students do not deserve the denial of access to a language- and culture-rich environment. Many students, both typically developing and with disabilities, will not attend institutes of higher education after completing or dropping out of high school; by allowing them to take FL courses, we foster their ability to see the world through multiple lenses even without the education in critical thinking that many students develop beyond the high school classroom.

The topic of inclusion in the FL classroom has been woefully ignored by researchers in both special education and FL education. Differentiation, while a popular

term in teacher preparation programs, is typically applied only to classrooms with students who are gifted and talented (Duvall, 2006); however, the effort to differentiate lessons and activities in order to include students with disabilities is equally important. Scholars in both fields must collaborate in order to develop the most effective means of including students of all ability levels in the FL classroom, such that secondary institutions need not deprive any student of a quality education with strong cultural elements. Textbooks used in FL education courses at the graduate level have, at best, a paragraph indicating that a discussion of student disabilities lies outside the scope of the text, and, at worst, a line of text stating that not all students are the same. Without understanding how to differentiate instruction and include students of all ability levels, teachers are unlikely to take on the time-consuming challenge of changing their lessons on their own.

How can we expect students with disabilities to succeed in higher education if they are unable to pursue foreign languages at the secondary level?

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