

What are learning disabilities? How can they affect language and culture learning?

The National Center for Learning Disabilities definition of learning disabilities (LD):

A neurological disorder that affects the brain's ability to receive, process, store and respond to information....unexplained difficulty a person of at least average intelligence has in acquiring basic academic skills...essential for success at school and work, and for coping with life in general. LD is not a single disorder...but it refers to a group of disorders.¹

Sometimes there is a fine line between individuals with learning difficulties (e.g., those who are slower because of lower innate ability [aptitude], age, anxiety, etc.) and those with a learning disability, defined by Ehrman as "learning difficulties so pervasive or severe that they markedly interfere with learning or day-to-day living (p. 263)." In some cases, adults are aware of their disabilities and have developed coping strategies to help them compensate. However, some individuals are not aware that they have a disability until they encounter language learning as an adult.

Learning disabilities can affect all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing. Coaches often report that those with learning disabilities have extreme difficulty with one or more of the following:

- keeping up with the rest of the class, requiring much more time than others
- using good learning strategies, including good time management and good planning skills
- all aspects of language learning
- sound/symbol association, pronouncing words they see in written form, all tasks involving reading
- spelling, writing letters or words backwards
- focusing on the aspect of language they are supposed to be focusing on
- taking tests, particularly written tests and timed tests
- self-directed learning
- managing debilitating emotions such as anxiety, lack of confidence, fear of failure

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The table on p. 2 (based on information from Ehrman, pp. 270-271) lists the most common types of disabilities that affect language learning and the signs or symptoms for each.

Can learning disabilities be identified accurately, or at least adequately?

A major concern must be accurate diagnosis. This must be done by trained professionals, and even then it is sometimes difficult to diagnose disabilities accurately. The standard procedure is to gather a wide variety of information, including family history, and not depend upon test results alone.

In addition to the cost in money and time, the diagnosis may not produce results that can be used to significantly improve learning. However, in many cases it can be very helpful, and in cases where medication and/or counseling are needed, an accurate diagnosis is essential.

¹National Center for Learning Disabilities Web site: http://www.nclد.org/LDInfoZone/InfoZone_FactSheet_LD.cfm.

It is sometimes difficult to determine whether an individual has a learning disability or a very strong learning style or preference. In addition, many learners find one or more aspects of language learning to be moderately to extremely difficult, but this does not mean that they have a learning disability. For many individuals, the suggested steps for the coach and the learner will be the same whether the individual's difficulty is called a learning disability, a strong learning style or preference, or a weaker area of learning.

Type of Disability	Typical Signs or Symptoms				
Perceptual: Auditory	difficulty distinguishing sounds	difficulty picking out auditory stimulus	auditory lag: slow processing of sounds, words, sentences	may miss part of what others say	may not hear rhyme well
Perceptual: Visual	transposes letters (dyslexia)	difficulty picking out visual stimulus	difficulty copying	difficulty coordinating eye-body movements	difficulty judging depth, distances
Integration: Sequencing & Simultaneous Processing	difficulty organizing work, notes, activities	difficulty working with background noise	difficulty doing two things at once: e.g., listening & taking notes	difficulty keeping things in order (e.g., months of year, instructions)	
Integration: Abstraction	difficulty organizing activities, learned material	difficulty generalizing & applying new rules	misses nuances	takes what is said too literally	may not understand humor
Memory	poor short-term auditory or visual memory	a quick forgetter as much as a slow learner	needs a great many repetitions; difficulty memorizing facts, new terms, etc.	difficulty transferring new information to different contexts	cannot retrieve information easily
Output in native language: speaking & listening	pronunciation problems in native language	difficulty finding correct word in native language	difficulty responding to questions in native language ("demand" disability)	marked disfluency in native language conversation ("demand" disability)	may take excessive time to mentally process conversation in native language
Output: native language reading	reads slowly in native language	difficulty with reading comprehension in native language leads to problems summarizing	loses place in a series of readings		
Output: writing	severe handwriting problems (dysgraphia)	persistent inaccuracies in writing; severe & persistent spelling problems in native language	difficulty listening & taking notes (sound interference & short-term auditory dysfunction)	difficulty copying	difficulty putting ideas on paper
Output: motor activity	difficulty with physical coordination	difficulty copying (overlaps with perceptual: visual & output: writing)			
General functioning	general abilities & language skills inconsistent with each other	level of work varies considerably from day to day	becomes easily disoriented, confusing right & left, north & south	difficulty remembering time, "loses" time; seems to "switch off" or reports doing so	short concentration span; needs to be given information more than once

Dyslexia and ADD/ADHD

While some individuals with learning disabilities will not be aware of their particular learning challenge until they encounter language learning as an adult, those with either dyslexia or ADD/ADHD will often have been diagnosed during their elementary or high school years.

Dyslexia

Individuals with dyslexia have difficulties with reading, writing, spelling and sometimes even speaking. According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities, in some cases those with dyslexia can handle early reading and writing tasks in elementary school but later have problems with grammar, reading comprehension, using vocabulary in conversation, structuring their thoughts in a conversation, and more in-depth writing.

The Web site for the National Center for Learning Disabilities notes that some of the warning signs are difficulty in understanding that words are made up of sounds; difficulty in assigning correct sounds to symbols (alone and in words); reversing letters (e.g., *d* and *b*); pronouncing words improperly; difficulty with rhyming; difficulty with spelling; difficulty with learning the alphabet, numbers, days of week and other basic sequential information; difficulty with reading and reading comprehension; difficulty with organizing thoughts and summarizing; difficulty with organizing and managing time; difficulty with understanding idioms, jokes, proverbs; poor memory skills.

Symptoms vary widely from person to person, and some individuals have developed well-honed coping skills.

ADD/ADHD (Attention Deficit Disorder / Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder)

According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities, there are two predominant types of disabilities, (1) inattentive (ADD) and (2) hyperactive/impulsive (AD/HD), as well as combinations of the two. Those who have the first type have difficulty paying attention to details, sustaining attention, listening to and following instructions, and organizing their work and time. Those with the second type are very active as children but may be only internally restless as teenagers and adults. In addition, they may have difficulty taking turns in conversations and games, may act without thinking or anticipating the consequences, and they may have difficulty controlling their temper. Those with the second type are often diagnosed in school, while the inattentive (first) type may slip by.

As with other disabilities, symptoms can vary a great deal, and some individuals have well-developed skills for managing their disability. Medication and counseling are often helpful.

What steps can coaches take to help those with learning disabilities to be more effective language and culture learners?

1. Collect as much of the following information as possible:

- age, education, relevant work experience, personal interests
- significant cross-cultural experiences
- past language learning experiences, including successes and struggles
- history of hearing or speech problems, or other challenges that might affect learning
- the disability, including how it affects the learner, especially as it relates to aspects of language and culture learning (e.g. problems with reading, sound-symbol association, memory) (See the chart on p. 2.)
- what the learner has done to deal with the disability in past experiences (e.g., techniques and strategies the learner has found to be helpful)
- learning style (suggestion: use the learning styles tests in *LinguaLinks*)
- learning strengths and preferences
- Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) score, if available (this can often indicate potential areas of strength and weakness)
- attitudes and feelings about language and culture learning, including motivation
- emotional responses to language and culture learning, including confidence, fear and anxiety, willingness to take appropriate risks in communication, etc.
- learner training information (e.g., has the learner taken a pre-field second language acquisition course that can help him/her know how to go about the learning process?)
- (if applicable) evaluation and recommendations from pre-field second language acquisition course (e.g., does the evaluation say that the learner may need extra time for learning or that he/she may need to focus more on developing certain skills?)

2. Gather relevant information that will impact learning experience:

- organizational policies and requirements, including flexibility in special cases (e.g., know how much latitude you have in adjusting policies when needed)
- learner's on-field ministry or work assignment, including level and type of language that is needed to handle the assignment
- range of opportunities and options for language and culture learning
- time allowed for learning
- support available to learner
- other responsibilities during set-aside period for language and culture-learning

The coach must do everything possible to ensure success. This is not the time to cut corners.

3. Ensure successful learning experiences, including doing as many of the following as possible:

- When you suspect a learner has a disability, monitor that person closely, offering appropriate encouragement and guidance.
- When you are *certain* there is a *major* disability, make sure your organizational policies, requirements and procedures are realistic for this individual. Depending on the learner, here are some things to avoid:
 - *allowing the learner to go overseas without taking a Second Language Acquisition pre-field learner training course*
 - *getting no detailed feedback from the pre-field learner training course*
 - *requiring the learning of more than one language to a high degree of proficiency (and for some, requiring the learning of even one language to a high degree of proficiency) before you know what the learner is capable of*
 - *providing a fixed time length for full-time language learning with no possibility to extend the time period before beginning ministry or work responsibilities*
 - *allowing learner to proceed with language learning until a problem develops, and then backtracking to try to fix it only after severe damage has occurred*
 - *requiring learner to be in a class with others who are able to progress much more quickly*
 - *requiring learner to be in a class (or use an approach to learning) that does not fit with his/her learning style or is incompatible with his/her learning strengths*
 - *requiring learner to take stressful tests (especially timed tests)*
 - *allowing learner to be almost entirely self-directed when learner is unable to do this effectively*
- Make sure the learner's goals are realistic. For example, someone who will be in a support role will not need as high a level of language proficiency as a church planter, teacher, etc. This does not mean, however, that the learner should be excused from language learning. (See #5 below.)
- Make working with the learner a priority, so that he/she receives help as soon as possible rather than letting the learner flounder and become overly discouraged before any action is taken.
- Consult with the field director and others as necessary to get professional help. This might include diagnosis, counseling, and medication.
- Consult with the learner to work out a learning plan that will accommodate as many of the learner's special needs as possible. This plan will probably involve experimentation to find procedures that work well and those that are less effective or even ineffective. For example, some learners who flounder in the classroom do far better in "street learning."
- Provide on-going learner training, to make sure the learner is using productive learning strategies.
- Provide as much guidance and overall structure as the learner seems to need. Learners with more extreme learning disabilities often have a great deal of difficulty with planning and evaluating their learning. While others can thrive as self-directed learners, these learners may at first be able to handle self-direction only with small learning tasks. With time and practice, however, they can gradually become more self-directed, taking more and more responsibility for their own learning.

- Do whatever you can to remove the major obstacles. For example, if a learner needs extra practice opportunities in order to process the language, then find a helper/tutor who is willing to do this.
 - Avoid comparisons with others who are learning more quickly, more successfully, etc. Encourage tutors and helpers to avoid comparing the learner with others. Check to make sure the learner's teachers, tutors, or helpers are not using ridicule and shaming as a method to motivate the learner.
 - When talking with teachers, tutors, and helpers, refer to the specific challenges the learner has (e.g., John has difficulty in hearing the differences between sounds) rather than using the terms *learning disability* or *learning disabled*. These terms can have very negative connotations in many cultures, thus putting the learner at a further disadvantage.
 - Offer lots of encouragement so that negative emotions are not allowed to pull the learner down. It is essential that the learner maintain a "can do" attitude with motivation high enough to keep going even on the roughest of days. Keep the focus on what the learner is able to accomplish, not on how far he/she is behind others in progress or what he/she is still unable to do. (See Coachnotes: "Enhancing Learner Motivation")
 - Do all you can to ensure success each step of the way, knowing that lack of success even in small areas may be perceived as total failure and a reason to give up completely.
 - Allow additional time when needed—and keep in mind that extra time will nearly always be needed.
 - Make sure the learner is not trying to work too quickly through the learning material, but is allowing for lots of practice using as many different modalities (sight, hearing, speaking, touch) as possible.
 - Make sure the learner is getting frequent feedback from teachers, tutors, helpers, etc. Use the feedback to adjust the learning experiences and schedule as needed.
 - Stress to the learner (and relevant others) that he/she needs to first encounter new language through his/her stronger skills, while gradually stretching the weaker areas.
4. Consider the following suggestions to see which ones would be helpful for your learner. Although these will not be useful for all learners with disabilities, these will be helpful for most learners.
- Make heavy use of advance organizers (strategies or ways of linking what the learner already knows to what is about to be learned)
 - Remind learner of good strategies he/she can use that day (or that hour) to enhance learning
 - Make sure the learner encounters the learning material in a variety of ways. As much as possible, try to see that new material is introduced through the learner's strongest learning style and preferences.
 - Control the complexity of directions.
 - Break down tasks into small increments of learning and present them in a paced, sequential manner.
 - Present a variety of short assignments.
5. Be willing to change the learner's work or ministry assignment when necessary.
- Make changes in assignment only for extreme cases in which the learner cannot develop sufficient language competence to handle his/her work or ministry assignment.
 - Keep in mind that all learners, regardless of their disabilities, can learn the language to some degree of proficiency. In my personal opinion, no one should be totally excused from language learning. Instead, the coach and the learner (along with relevant others) should work out a plan that requires a realistic level of language proficiency for the learner.

Summary

While some language learners with learning disabilities will have no more challenges than most adults in language and culture learning, others can have a difficult time learning a new language. Some will never achieve the level of proficiency they would like. However, with the right type of help and sufficient time, most of these individuals can be at least moderately successful language and culture learners. Whatever level of proficiency they achieve, few can make it happen without guidance and encouragement from a language coach.

This article is a revised version of a presentation at the October 2004 International Congress on Language Learning in Colorado Springs.

What resources are available?

"50 Tips on the Management of Attention Deficit Disorder in Adults." <http://bevprice.com/web36.html>

CAELA Resource Collections: Learning Disabilities and Adult ESL. <http://www.cal.org/caela/ResLD.htm>

Center for Literacy Studies Web site. Downloadable 161-page resource book, *Keys to Effective LD Teaching*, which is built upon the foundation laid in *Bridges to Practice*. http://cls.coe.utk.edu/pdf/keys_ld/keys_ld.pdf

Ehrman, Madeline E. 1996. "When You Need Outside Help." Ch. 13 in *Understanding Second Language Learning Difficulties*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Learning Disabilities and Foreign Language: Overview and Manual.
<http://www.smcm.edu/aldiv/ilc/pdfdocs/arnett-english.pdf>

National Center for Learning Disabilities Website. http://www.ld.org/LDInfoZone/InfoZone_FactSheetIndex.cfm
Fact Sheets on various topics such as dyslexia, information processing disorders, auditory processing disorders, visual processing disorders, and ADD.

National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) *Bridges to Practice Series* <http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/ld/bridges/bridges.html>
Guidebook 1: Preparing to Serve Adults with Learning Disabilities
Guidebook 2: The Assessment Process
Guidebook 3: The Planning Process
Guidebook 4: The Teaching/Learning Process

The *Bridges to Practice* materials can help you recognize learning disabilities, learn a screening process, and learn what to do when an adult has been diagnosed with a disability. The program consists of four guidebooks that contain the training materials, and a fifth book that is a trainer's manual.

National Institute for Literacy. Literacy and Learning Disabilities Special Collection Website: LD Appropriate Instruction. This contains three excellent on-line resources from *Bridges to Practice*: "Characteristics of LD Appropriate Instruction," "Instructional Frameworks for Adults with LD," "Implementing LD Appropriate Instruction."
http://ldlink.coe.utk.edu/ld_instruction.htm

Root, Christine. 1994. "A Guide to Learning Disabilities for the ESL Classroom Practitioner." *TESL-EJ*, April, 1994.
<http://www-writing.berkeley.edu/TESL-EJ/ej01/a.4.html>

Schwartz, Robin & Lynda Terrill. 2000. "ESL Instruction and Adults with Learning Disabilities." *ERIC Digest*.
<http://www.cal.org/caela/digests/LD2.htm>

Schwarz, Robin L. Web site: Learning Disabilities and the English Language Learner.
http://ldlink.coe.utk.edu/pdf_files/esl_ld.pdf

Schwarz, Robin L. (1997). "Learning Disabilities and Foreign Language Learning: A Painful Collision."
http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/foreign_lang/painful_collision.html

Smythe, Ian, ed. The WDNF Collection of Dyslexia and Help Advice Sheets. <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/wdnf/advice.pdf>

The University of Hull. Dyslexia and Learning a Modern Foreign Language Website
<http://www.hull.ac.uk/langinst/olc/dyslexia.htm>

Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center (VALRC) Website. Practical articles addressing the diagnosis of various types of learning disabilities and a range of learning solutions. <http://www.aelweb.vcu.edu/links/ld.shtml>

For more *ICCT Coachnotes* and information on Language Coach Workshops,
go to <http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/icct/>