

THE UNIVERSITY SPANISH CLASSROOM AND THE LEARNING DISABLED STUDENT: FROM THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT TO A DESIGNED PROGRAM

Irma F. Cobb

Today's higher education is a challenge for college professors. The diversity of learners in the classroom ranges from traditional students to students with special learning needs. The number of learning disabled (LD) students attending college is growing, since LD students are graduating from high school more frequently. The percentage of LD students in higher education is between three and five percent. As the overall number of LD students increases, so does the number of LD students in the Spanish classroom. Students identified as LD in colleges and universities, under the law, must receive appropriate higher education. The interpretation of appropriate education varies from simple accommodations for students (extra time to complete assignments) in the classroom to modified courses (modified curriculum, slower pace). Clearly the most effective teaching approach is a separate course specifically designed for LD students.

In order to effectively teach the LD student, it is first important to understand what a learning disability is. A learning disability is a neurological (nervous system) or developmental (maturational) malfunction of the human body (Ashe 8). The malfunction will not manifest itself immediately after birth, rather it is usually detected during school years. Sometimes a manifestation of a learning problem is caught in the first years of school, but some other times it could happen much latter in life. It is not uncommon that the detection comes from the child's teacher, when a child cannot perform at a similar level and pace as the peers are doing in the classroom. In this case, a learning disability

might be suspected. The earlier the disability is detected, the easier it becomes for the students to learn how to compensate through the school years by receiving the specific school accommodations. As the child matures and grows, the disability become more obvious. Some students are able to do well in early school performances stages, but as the child moves on into higher and more sophisticated school material, the gap could increase. Some students are not able to adapt and/or compensate in all the school subjects. As the LD students move on to higher education it becomes more difficult to find programs and support needed for their professional success.

The LD student may have been identified in elementary or high school, and likely received special education. However, he or she may be entering the university without having been previously identified as having a learning disability. The question then becomes, who decides if the university student has a learning disability? There are experts in the public and private educational system that will evaluate a referred student. A referral or a petition for evaluation of a student can be suggested by parents or teachers. If the concern comes from school, the parents will be contacted and informed of what is suspected, then the parents should make a decision about their child being evaluated or not for a suspected learning disability. If the student is under 21 year old, parents must sign a consent form for the child to be evaluated. However, if the student is over 21 years old the decision is made by the person involved. The learning disabled higher education students represent 3-5 percent of the population (Scott 1). Nevertheless, the college students are not obligated to identify themselves. Each student decides if he/she wants to enroll with the Office of Disability. If the student enrolls, he/she becomes eligible for the accommodation that each university provides. Some of the students decide not to be identified and do not receive any accommodation from the university. Some of these unidentified students enroll in the Spanish classroom, and the teacher has no idea that these students might need a different learning set up (smaller classes, slower learning pace, shorter time classes, tutoring, etc.). However, unless the students approach the professor, there is no clear indication that these students need a different learning

environment. If the college students have been identified by the university as having an LD, the Spanish teacher, and the other teachers, will be contacted by the disability office on campus by sending a letter informing about the specific accommodations for the student.

Just like other classrooms, the Spanish classroom is overcrowded. The classes are housing an average of 25 to 30 students. This is not an ideal situation for the students to learn Spanish, but the majority of the universities and colleges deal with this reality. It is not unusual that the Spanish professor has had students who came to class, did all the required work, participated in the classroom, and studied for the quizzes and tests. However, for some reason the students did not do well in tests and had problems putting the course information together. The reasons for poor performance can vary. It could be that these students had a predisposition for the class, they did not know how to study, or perhaps, they had a learning disability that inhibited their ability to learn Spanish. Some language studies have shown evidence that students who have problems learning and speaking their native language could also have similar problems learning a foreign language (Scott 1). There seems to be a direct correlation between having problems with the student's native language and learning a foreign language. Research has shown that LD students have problems in their native language in the areas of writing, reading, speaking, spelling, phonetics (sounds), syntactic (use of the grammar rules) and semantics (understanding words meaning and concepts). It should not be a surprise that these problems are transferred to the learning of a new language (Scott 1). There are also suggestions that by getting better in these areas in the students' native language, the ability to learn a second language should improve. It is also important to mention that as the students move into the learning of more difficult school material, it becomes harder to compensate and adapt the lack of skills that underlie learning a second language. The degree to which the students' learning capability for a second language is affected by the limitations on their native language varies from student to student. The way they are taught a second language also will dictate their success.

It is very important to note that there are specific federal

guidelines governing the rights of learning disabled students. Elementary, middle, and high school special education programs are controlled and guided by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). By law, public or private schools receiving any federal funds must provide programs specifically designed to serve LD students. The LD student in higher education is protected and supported by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504). At the higher education level, under the law, programs designed to serve LD students are not mandatory. The law states that the universities and colleges receiving federal funds must simply accommodate the students with learning disabilities to the best of their abilities (Moore 1).

Once the LD students are identified, appropriate accommodations should be considered. The most common approach is to accommodate the students within the regular classes. The accommodations for each student can be very simple, but they can also be very demanding. Under the law, the professor must honor these accommodations to the extent of his/her capabilities. Simple accommodations can vary from a seat selection in the classroom, the use of a computer in class, bringing a recorder to class, to having extra time to complete assignments. Some other accommodations which can be very demanding may include an alternative format of the tests, a slower learning pace, extra time to take a test (two to three days), a quiet place to take the test by him/herself, different teaching methodology, and perhaps daily tutoring. If the Spanish professor has only one LD student, these accommodations will probably will not affect the professor's already established university commitments. However, if the professor has two or more students with different accommodations to honor, then the situation becomes a challenge. This challenge perhaps is going to take some training, reading, and adaptation of teaching strategies. The time needed to prepare alternative test formats, to give exams in different settings, the elaboration of extra material to teach the LD students, and tutoring can be an overwhelming situation and very difficult to accomplish. The natural question may arise: It is fair to the Spanish teacher to ask for that extra time and work to accommodate the LD students? Usually

the professor is already too busy trying to keep up with classes, advising students, departmental and university committees, presentations, research, and departmental demands. While some professors are accommodating the LD students the best they can, it is a losing situation for both the LD student and the Spanish professor. The student is not getting the appropriate learning set up, and the best teaching approach that could work for him, because the professor does not have the time and energy to appropriately serve the LD student. The situation is a reality since the professor some times does not know about the students accommodations, and some students pass unnoticed throughout the Spanish courses. The result is that too many students are not passing the Spanish requirements, or is taking them two to three trials to accomplish these courses. On the other hand there are the frustrated students who are trying hard to pass the Spanish courses, they participate and complete the course requirements, however, they simply cannot pass the exams or retain the information needed to successfully completed the Spanish courses. There are few possible solutions to this losing situation. Some colleges have been very successful offering foreign language waivers or substitutions, and modified programs to the students with a documented LD condition.

Of the various approaches to accommodating LD students, the most effective approach is a modified designed program for LD students. There are some universities that have designed such modified foreign language programs. Those colleges that have these foreign languages programs have trained and compensated (money/smaller class overload) their faculty, developed slower a paced program, made smaller classes, and offered alternative testing procedures and free tutoring. Most have seen the LD students finish the foreign language requirements. The University of Colorado at Boulder offers three semester sequences in the languages of Spanish, Italian, and Latin. The professors for these classes have been specially selected and trained to teach the courses. The students must be screened by Disability Services and provide a description of personal foreign language difficulties (Barr 2). Georgia Southern University offers a foreign

language program for students at risk. This program includes Latin and Spanish courses in a sequence of two semesters. The student must be identified as LD, or be considered at risk by examination of records and interviews (Ashe 6). Louisiana State University offers a two semester sequence in Latin. Again, the students must be identified as LD. Southern University in Baton Rouge initiated a modified basic Spanish class in the Spring of 2001. In the fall semester of 2001, a sequence of two semesters of basic Spanish courses will be started at Southern. The students must be identified by the Office of Disability Services, or have been previously enrolled in a Spanish course and have been recommended by the Spanish professor who taught the class. The administrative support of the university is crucial to start a modified program. It is not an easy job to train instructors, adapt the curriculum, change the teaching methodology, and alter the course pace to serve students with different needs than the traditional ones. The following paragraphs will describe the main elements of a course specifically designed for LD students. The main elements include: Trained, qualified professors, selection of students for the course, individual meetings with students, an appropriate learning environment, specific rules and regulations, individual learning styles, class structure, multisensory teaching, testing, and course evaluations.

Trained, qualified professors: A main concern for the university will be that the teachers get the right training to adapt the teaching strategies and learning environment to the advantage of the LD students. This training can be done by going to workshops and conferences, and by reading materials related to teaching methodology and how LD students learn best. The modification of the curriculum, pace of instruction, and changes and adaptations for each class can be suggested by the full Spanish faculty. The instructors will have to devote extra preparation time for each modified course taught, since there will be more time needed for tests, pedagogical material, and individualized tutoring. The instructor could negotiate an overload reduction with the department of foreign languages during each semester that this class is offered.

Selection of students for the LD course: It is recommended for

the professor to avoid conflict with legal issues, and let the Office of Disabilities to handle students' eligibility. This Office has an official list of the students enrolled in the university who are LD. If a student is identified in the classroom for the first time, the instructor can suggest the student visit the Office of Disability. The professor must always check and make sure that whatever recommendation is given to the student must be legally appropriate. The director of the Office of Disability can tell the professor the legal steps and procedures to follow in order to contact LD students who may need to take a foreign language class. The professor could formulate a letter, following the law, informing the students about the class being available to them and under which circumstances. The distribution of the letter could be through the office of disabilities, but the instructor must sign the request prior to enrollment to control the number of students participating in the class. Another group of students that can enroll in the modified Spanish courses are the students who are recommended by other instructors to take this class, and/or those students who might have taken the same class two or three times without yet being successful. After the participants have been selected, the students should be present from the beginning of the course.

Individual meetings with students: The LD Spanish class should not have more than 15 students enrolled; an ideal number will be 10 or less. The instructor should schedule an individual meeting with each student enrolled in the class. At this meeting the special accommodations can be discussed, and an individualized teaching-learning strategy can be developed. The professor should listen to the special requests from the students, as well as put together personal information from the student (such as phone number, address, other courses taken, background in Spanish, feelings about taking the Spanish requirement/election, positive and negative experiences in the Spanish learning environment, learning style, learning strengths and weaknesses, what he/she likes and dislikes). From this meeting the professor can develop a personal file for each student where the official LD evaluation will be included as well as notes and information gathered throughout the semester. If tutoring is an accommodation required for the student,

the file will help keep a record of time, visits, activities reviewed during tutoring, etc. The professor should develop a plan to honor the student's accommodations and the plan should be discussed in detail with the student prior to its implementation.

Creating an appropriate learning environment: This is one of the most critical points in any learning situation. The professor is going to set the direction of the learning experience from the first day of class. Anxiety is one of the characteristics that will affect the learning process among LD students, especially foreign language learning. The students feel anxious because the skills needed to succeed in the Spanish classroom are those that they have trouble mastering (writing, reading, speaking, listening). The instructor must create a friendly environment to eliminate the natural levels of anxiety of the LD students. The teacher's creativity and motivation will come into play here. Some Spanish teachers are not English native speakers, so by telling the students that the professor will probably experience some of the same difficulties mastering English as the students do in Spanish, it may alleviate some anxiety. Having a small class also reduces the anxiety level. Adding a reward system for the class will motivate the student to actively participate in the Spanish class, and take away the fear to make mistakes in pronunciation, grammar or recalling information. The classroom environment can be reinforced by creating surroundings related to the Spanish language. For example, signs written in Spanish can be posted on the walls, windows, door, lights, desk, student's desks, etc. This will create an environment for the class and the signs can be used also to learn vocabulary. The signs can be changed weekly as the class learns new vocabulary that will apply to each chapter or lecture. Some examples are to have a poster with the human body parts written in Spanish to learn them, a family tree made with pictures from the students enrolled in the class to learn names of family members, and pictures or real clothing items with the signs in Spanish. If possible, classroom distractions should be minimized. A classroom where there is low student traffic, small windows, only one entrance door, etc. is preferred. It is important the students arrive always on time and stay until the class ends to avoid any environment distractions. The instructor needs to motivate the students to use as many skills as the student possesses to learn Spanish. A major mistake from the instructor's point

of view is to concentrate on what the students *cannot* do. The professor must concentrate on what the students are able to do versus what they may have trouble mastering. The LD students are not unable to learn, what they experience is a condition that disrupts some of their abilities to internalize information in order to formulate the appropriate response.

Specific rules and regulations: Rules and regulations will still exist in the Spanish LD class. The rules and regulations must be explained in detail to the students, from arriving on time to class, to consequences for missing exam dates and assignments. It is recommended to write a letter of agreement clearly explaining the rules, obligations, and regulations of the class, and provide a copy to the students to be signed. This letter should be viewed as a contract to remind the students of their duties and expectations for this class. The student's signature as well as the instructor's signature should appear on the agreement letter. The expectations that the professor has in mind for the students to archive and how to reach them needs to be clearly explained. A good way to do it is by explaining in detail to the students how use the course material and developing a plan to help the student organize and move at the same pace that the instructor will. The use of the course material needs to be presented as a model. Since the LD students are not very well organized and they get easily confused, it is recommended to develop check lists. These are used at the beginning of each chapter in the notebook, for chapters covered in the book, labwork, assignments, and grades. The instructor can provide a chapter check list that will include de grammar and practice points covered in each chapter and a blank to write the date.

Chapter 1:

_____ 1.1 Subject pronouns, pages 5-6. Exercises 1 and 2.

Date: _____

_____ 1.2 The verb *to be*, pages 7-8. Exercises 3 and 4.

Date: _____

_____ 1.3 Nouns gender, pages 8-9. Exercise 5.

Date: _____

_____ 1.4 Nouns number, pages 9-10. Exercises 6 and 7.

Date: _____

The student can look back to the check list to find information as he moves on in the semester. Similar check list can be created to organize each important subject and/or area in the Spanish class. How to use the textbook and the workbook is also essential information for the LD students. The instructors should take time to show and explain how the textbook, the workbook, the audiolab, the computer lab work, etc., will be used in the class. A checklist can be created for each component of the class.

Textbook:

- _____ The book is divided in 10 chapters
- _____ This course will include up to chapter 5.
- _____ Each chapter is divided in three sections.
- _____ The first section with white pages is designed for exercises applying the grammar points of the book.
- _____ The second section with white pages is designed for the vocabulary for the chapter.
- _____ The third section, with blue pages, is designed for the grammar points of the chapter.
- _____ At the back of the book appendixes 1 to 4:
- _____ Appendix 1. Charts of regular and irregular verbs are included.
- _____ Appendix 2. Grammar summary tables
- _____ Appendix 3. Accentuation and spelling summary tables.
- _____ Appendix 4. Answer key to grammar exercises.
- _____ Spanish-English vocabulary.

A similar checklist can be made for each course material used.

Individual learning styles: The way the students learn is very unique to their personality, individual information processing, social interaction, and instructional methods (Claxton and Murrell 1). The learning style and the disposition to learn a subject are crucial on how easy or difficult the acquisition of new knowledge becomes. When the student is motivated to learn and feels comfortable in the learning environment, the learning results could be greater. It is very difficult to teach students who do not want to be in the Spanish classroom and who have a learning style that does not match the instructional style from the professor. Useful information should be developed connecting the official LD

evaluation, information from the student's personal meeting and the way the student learns best, in order to serve the individualized learning needs of the students.

Class structure: The professor needs to be very consistent and organize in the classroom. Since the LD students get very easily distracted and lost, the professor should be aware if the students are following him. Some times the full class will follow at the same speed, but some other times students will fall behind and will get lost. The instructor needs to assure the students participation and attention. When using reading skills make sure the reading material is given to the students ahead of time. The students may need to read at home, take some notes and underline some words, as well as look up the meaning of the words. Also the students will need a ruler or card to keep them on the right reading line. In the classroom, always start with a review of the last subject covered in class. In a corner of the board make a list of the grammar points already covered in the chapter, and in the rest of the board or in overheads present the new information for the class. On the other corner write the information that will be covered next class. The professor should make clearly defined notes on the overheads, using big letters and only including one subject on each overhead. If the board is used, the information must be very well organized. The board can be divided in two or three areas to talk about different information and different chalk colors can be use for each segment. At the opposite corner, where the covered points were written, write the subject and pages that the student should study for the next class. The professor should not switch the order of how the material is presented, consistency is very important. By organizing the visual information in the same way every time, the student will be able to focus on some other sensorial stimulations. The instructor should bring some material to match the notes written, such as some realistic items, music, pictures, videos, create role playing to stimulate motor response activities, etc.

Multisensory teaching: This teaching approach is the one most recommended to teach LD students. This means the professor must present the class material in more than one sensorial channel for the

student to be able to assimilate the information (visual, verbal, listening, kinesthetic, hands on). For example, how to teach the colors in the Spanish class: Present the names of the colors on an overhead. Then pieces of construction paper, that match the same colors on the overhead, are given to the students. Next the professor calls, one by one, the color in Spanish and shows the piece of paper with the Spanish name written on it. The student writes also the Spanish color on their color paper. On the board, the teacher divides the Spanish colors into syllables and pronounces them for the students. The students write on the back of their paper the color divided into syllables, adding any extra pronunciation clues that will help them to reproduce the color name later. The professor then places the names of the colors on real items brought to the class. For example: an apple for red, an orange for orange, an avocado for black, and a lemon for yellow. For practice, the teacher has color signs on white paper and the students place the color on matching classroom items. As homework, the students make cards, just like the ones used in class, for all the colors. A representative picture that will help the student recall the color should be placed on the card. Also, each card can be shaped into the same figure of the picture used on the back of the card. The cards can be use to recall information during the class and perhaps, for quizzes.

Testing: Testing is the way to evaluate the student and to obtain feedback for the professor to improve teaching-learning techniques. The students react in different ways to testing, especially if they are anxious learners. If the levels of anxiety are high at the time a test is taken, it is possible that the student performance will be affected. The professor should take into consideration to review the material included in the test and explain the format that each subject will be tested. The way that the testing procedures are directed in the classroom is up to the professor. If the students have trouble responding to traditional test formats (multiple choice, filling the blank, essays, etc.), alternative choices of testing should be considered (oral, reading the test to the student, reorganizing the questions, etc.) By reviewing previous information right before introducing new ones, the student sees the material at least a couple of times. If all the material expected to be

covered in the test is reviewed the class before the test, in same the way the subjects are going to be presented on the test, the student will have a third opportunity to see the learned material. The same quiz format could be applied to the exams, so the students will be familiar with the format and the subject tested. The time to take the test could be divided into two days, for the students who need this accommodation, or allowed as much time as the student needs in one session. The environment for the test should be controlled for distractions, and questions and consultations to the instructor should be allowed. The number of test questions should be shorter than the version used for the other Spanish courses. During the next class after the test day the professor should go over the test and provide the information, about the test to the students. Immediate feedback should be requested about the test to correct any mistakes during the testing procedure or make suggestions.

Course Evaluation: Evaluation of the course should be provided directly from the students, and the tool selected to provide this feedback can be chosen by the instructor. The students' opinions and suggestions are going to be the most valuable information to make the course better. The students' personal input will be critical to adjust and consider changes for the following semesters. Every semester the instructor will revise and evaluate the course and changes will be made. What worked for one class one semester may not work for a different class in a different semester. Always save the teaching material to be reused.

The information and suggestions mentioned in this paper were put together from readings, talks, and a basic Spanish model class conducted during the Spring semester of 2001 at Southern University. As it was discussed throughout the paper, it is not easy to teach students who do not fit the usual and traditional learning style. In order to successfully teach Spanish to LD students, modified courses must be available to them, individualized accommodations must be honored, a different methodology must be used in the classroom, and most of all professors at the college level must try to understand individual student differences in the Spanish classroom.

WORKS CITED

- "The ABC of LD/ADD. Learning Disabilities (LD) and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)." *LD OnLine Newsletter*. September, 2000 <http://www.idonline.org/ld_indepth.html>.
- Ashe, Althea. "Classroom Strategies for Students with Learning Disabilities (LD)." Louisiana State University. November, 2000.
- Barr, Vickie. *Foreign Language Requirements and Students with Learning disabilities. ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, September-October 1992*. Washington, D.C.
- Claxton, Charles, and Patricia H. Murrel. *Learning Styles. ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, 1989*. Washington D.C.
- "Definitions and Issues." *LD OnLine Newsletter*. <http://www.idonline.org/ld_indepth/adult/definitions.html>
- Health Resource Center. *Success in College for Adults with Learning Disabilities. LD OnLine Newsletter*. <http://www.idonline.org/ld_indepth/adult/health_collegesuccess.html>.
- "Learning Disabilities and You at the University." *LD OnLine Newsletter*. <<http://iago.stfx.ca/campus/stu-serv/disabled-students/ld/and-you.html>>
- More, Francis X., III. "Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act: Accommodating the Learning Disabled Student in the Foreign Language Curriculum." *LD OnLine Newsletter*. Winter 1995. <<http://www.flh.vcu.edu/ld/504.html>>.
- National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities. American Speech-Language Hearing Association. *Adults With Learning Disabilities: A Call to Action. A position paper of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities. February 10, 1985*. Baltimore, MD.
- Schwarz, Robin L. "Learning Disabilities and Foreign Language Learning: A Painful Collision." November 1997. *LD OnLine*. <http://www.idonline.org/ld_indepth/foreign_lang/painful_collision.html>.
- Scott, Sally S., and Elaine Manglitz. "Foreign Language Learning and Learning Disabilities. Making the College Transition." *LD OnLine Newsletter*. <http://www.idonline.org/ld_indepth/foreign_lang_their/world_2000.html>.