INCLUSIVE STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING ENGLISH TO ROMANIAN STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

Prof. Stancu Priciu Daniela
Liceul Teologic Adventist Craiova

Up to 10% of learners are estimated to have some degree of learning difficulty. If you're a teacher it is likely that you will have some students with Learning Difficulties (LDs). Indeed, it is estimated that between five and ten per cent of any given population have some degree of learning difficulty.As an ESL teacher it is particularly important to consider the impact of this since language acquisition is one of the key areas most affected by learning difficulties. Whilst LDs can make the already challenging task of learning a new language even more difficult, there are strategies that you can use to make it easier and more rewarding for your students. The challenge is even bigger for Romanian students and teachers since in our country there are very few specialized teachers who can come and join the class, helping with teaching students with special educational needs. Only for serious affections does the government finance special teachers (itinerants) who can come and help the students who have special educational needs.

Recommendation 2006/962/EC resulted in the EU Framework for Key Competences for lifelong learning (LLL), one of the key competences being communication in foreign languages. This document recognizes the Member States' role to provide the appropriate infrastructures for continuing education and training of adults. Added to that, it also highlights the importance to ensure equal access to LLL. In particular, equality and access for those in need of support to fulfil their educational potential is underlined. This foundational idea becomes evident when teaching people with special needs.

Background: Understanding LDs

Learning difficulties are best summarised as neurologically-based processing problems. Typically, these processing problems affect the acquisitions of basic skills such as reading, writing or mathematics.

Having LDs does not mean that an individual cannot learn – absolutely not. It does mean, however, that a compensating strategy may be needed for teaching that takes into consideration the specific aspects of learning that the student has difficulties with. That is to say, students with LDs may need a more individualised and tailored approach to learning.

LDs vary amongst individuals and the term actually refers to a wide group of disorders. Some of the most common ones include:

- Dyslexia
- Dysgraphia
- Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity (ADHD)

It is very important to remember that LDs are not a sign of low intelligence. They are, in fact, in no way a reflection of intelligence level and many people with LDs possess above average intellectual capabilities.

- Being vigilant for the signs of LD among your students
- Identification is key to managing LDs as best as possible
- Giving students the most appropriate support in their learning.

Added vigilance for these signs is needed in developing countries in particular, since students are far less likely to have been identified as having LDs than in many Western countries where the systems and procedures of diagnosis are more rigorous. In fact, in some countries LDs are not even officially recognised.Below are some of the most common and identifiable warning signs that a student may have LDs:

- auditory difficulties
- reading and writing difficulties
- motor difficulties
- memory difficulties
- attention difficulties

Classroom strategies and best practices

Naturally, many teachers will be concerned about striking a balance between accommodating the needs of LD students and not holding back the rest of the class. Fortunately, the strategies outlined below are simply good teaching practices and should benefit the students with LDs as well as the class as a whole.

In fact, it is advised that the teacher make no indication to the class that a particular exercise is targeted at any individual or group of students. This will help to keep the classroom environment inclusive at all times.

1. Create a positive learning environment: focus on what students can achieve rather than what they cannot

Instead of focusing on things that the students are struggling with, try and develop the areas that they are finding success in. This will help to boost self-esteem and, as the old saying goes, success breeds success.

For example, if a student suffers from Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), focus them on language activities that are shorter, allowing them to hold concentration throughout the exercise. Longer tasks should be broken up into smaller chunks that are more manageable and allow the student to break attention naturally in-between.

Praising any successes and moving quickly passed any areas of particular difficulty will help student confidence greatly.

2. Highlight objectives and structure activities clearly

Providing an overview of the session's objectives and activities can help students prepare for the day's learning. Furthermore, having a frequently used lesson structure can help students with LDs as they can benefit from some level of regularity and structure in their learning time.

3. Have a set of positive rules

When adequate provisions are not made, LDs such as ADD and ADHD can lead to behavioural problems. Having a list of ground rules for class time that states the positive actions that are expected of students (as opposed to a list of "don't-dos") can really help with student behaviour. Furthermore, have other students lead by example by praising positive actions for the rest of the class to see and learn from.

4. Reduce potential distractions

LD students are often sensitive to distractions. Reducing noise and any other things that can cause distraction to students will definitely help them keep focus and make for more effective lessons. Students with ADD or ADHD or those that are particularly sensitive to distractions are best placed towards the front of the class which will help them focus on the lesson.

5. Time activity effectively

It is important to consider how much time students with LDs will need to complete tasks. Students with reading and writing difficulties such as dyslexia will need to be allocated more time. Those with attention disorders will need tasks that are short and brisk. Design lesson plans accordingly.

6. Utilise all the senses for learning

By adopting a learning approach that is multi-sensory, students with LDs can better substitute for channels that they may struggle to learn through. Read text aloud, use visual and kinaesthetic aids.

Teaching students with LDs may be more difficult than teaching the other students who do not have special needs but the satisfaction is great when you see progres and desire to learn as well as pure, genuine happines in their eyes.

Resurse

1. https://edict.ro/modalitati-de-predare-incluziva/
2. www.gov.uk/government/publications. Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years. Statutory guidance for organisations which work with and support children and young people who have special educational needs or disabilities. January 2015.
3. Harmer, J., (2005). ThePractice of English Language Teaching, (3rd ed.). Essex: Longman.