

Preface

Whereas language learning comes easily and effortlessly to some people, many students struggle with the acquisition of additional languages. The cause of language learning difficulties can be manifold, but one group of people who find language learning particularly challenging are those who tend to be different in their general approach to learning from the majority of other students. In some countries these learners are seen to have a learning disability. However, in this book we will show that perceiving them as different rather than deficient in certain skills and abilities helps us understand these learners better and assists in their successful inclusion in the language classroom. Around 10% of students exhibit a specific learning difference (SpLD). In other words, they have difficulties with the acquisition of literacy-related skills (dyslexia), numeracy (dyscalculia), the coordination of movement (dyspraxia), sustained attention (attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder) and social interaction (autism). This means that in every learning group of 20 students, we are likely to find at least two learners who have an SpLD.

Since the first publication of our book, language teachers' awareness of SpLDs and knowledge about inclusive language teaching has grown considerably. Nonetheless, in a large number of contexts it is still common practice that students with SpLDs are exempted from language learning on the grounds that the successful attainment of L2 competence is beyond their reach, and the time spent in the language classroom might be better used for the development of first language skills. Exemption is also often suggested to students and their parents because many language teachers feel that they lack the necessary pedagogical tools to accommodate the needs of students with SpLDs. This practice, however, seriously disadvantages students with SpLDs in today's globalised world, where proficiency in a language other than one's own first language might be as important as literacy and numeracy skills. Lack of a workable knowledge of another language might deprive students with SpLDs of equal opportunities in education, at the workplace and potentially even in their private lives. For this reason, the language teaching profession needs to be equipped with appropriate theoretical knowledge and evidence-based pedagogical tools to support students with SpLDs in the process of learning additional languages.

This book is intended to help language teachers to work effectively and successfully with students who have SpLDs. To achieve this aim, we believe that teachers need to have an understanding of the nature of SpLDs and how these affect general learning processes and the mechanisms of second language acquisition (SLA). Awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and the challenges that these learners face in the academic and private domains is a prerequisite for developing supportive and caring teacher attitudes and behaviour, and for establishing an inclusive classroom environment. In addition, language teachers need to be acquainted with the particular methods and techniques of teaching and assessment that foster success in language learning. Language teaching is also embedded in a wider social and educational context, and therefore it is important that language

teachers are cognisant of the general educational issues related to identifying and disclosing disabilities and to making transitions from one institution to the other.

The book was written with different language learning contexts and with various types of learners in mind. We aimed to address situations in which another language is taught as a foreign language in the classroom, as well as cases when students from different language backgrounds learn the local or majority language of a country they have moved to. We also discuss issues pertaining to teaching younger learners as well as adults. The book can form the basis of a module on a course for experienced language teachers, or be incorporated into a longer pre-service training course for novice teachers. Individual chapters could also be used independently as part of an ongoing professional development programme, or for self-study by individuals.

The revised and fully updated edition of our book begins by exploring a range of discourses that reflect different attitudes to disability, followed by a thorough discussion of the nature and predominant features of dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, attention deficit or hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism, and an analysis of the specific effects they can each have on language learning. Although a range of SpLDs are discussed and named as if they were separate causes of difficulty, it should be kept in mind that in reality it is not usually possible to separate one SpLD from another. Many people who show identifiable traits of one will also experience some traits of another; the incidence of co-occurrence may be around 70% between some SpLDs. For this reason, the term ‘SpLD’ is used throughout this book to denote any of the specific cognitive differences that a learner might exhibit. Occasionally, specific reference to one of the SpLDs is made in order to highlight the particular kind of difficulty that may be experienced (e.g. the kinds of difficulties with social interaction that are associated with autism). Where research is reported, the authors’ terminology, indicating the parameters of the work, is respected. Readers may perceive that there is more attention paid throughout the book to dyslexic tendencies than to the other SpLDs; this is a function of the fact that the difficulties most commonly associated with dyslexia are those that may affect language learning most directly (e.g. phonological and visual processing difficulties).

The remainder of the book charts the journey typical of a language learner who experiences these difficulties. This covers the process of identification and assessment, which should be followed by disclosure and sharing of the information gathered. This information feeds into the adjustments that can be made in classroom management, teaching techniques and assessment practices that enable language learners with an SpLD to succeed. Finally, in any instructional context, the learner ought to be encouraged to progress either onto the next level of education or into the workplace. Since language development affects the options that are open to learners at transition points, this is a key issue for language teachers. It is therefore explored in this final chapter, with particular reference to working with learners with an SpLD.