

# 6

## Accommodating Differences

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# Introduction

In a truly inclusive education system, no special accommodation for students with an SpLD would be necessary, as diversity in all its forms would be accepted as the norm. Until we reach this utopian situation, however, some adjustments may be needed to enable all students to access the curriculum on an equal footing with their peers. These adjustments may be necessary because of the different ways that learners with an SpLD respond to the environment of the classroom. The physical environment and the furniture and equipment that are available is often beyond the control of the classroom teacher, but having an understanding of some of the factors that are significant in creating a suitable environment may help teachers to make the best of the conditions they are working in.

Likewise, the curriculum may be set by the school management, or external agencies like the government or examining boards, but there are still measures that the classroom teacher can take to ensure that the way in which the curriculum is presented makes it as accessible as possible for all learners. This chapter will touch briefly on the way that tasks may be organized, but will not cover task types in any detail (see Chapter 7 'Techniques for Language Teaching' for more information on this).

One area which is usually well within the control of the classroom teacher is the way in which the class is managed, in terms of who interacts with whom, and how learning is facilitated. This chapter will therefore focus particularly on how teacher behaviour can positively affect the language learning experiences of students with an SpLD. Many of the suggestions made here may seem to experienced teachers like general good practice, and this is indeed the case: what is good practice for learners with an SpLD is usually good for all students in a class, with some variations to account for individual strengths and weaknesses.

# Environment

As has been discussed above, students who have an SpLD may perceive the world differently, and this is particularly important to keep in mind when considering the physical environment of the classroom. It is well documented that people who experience some difficulties due to an SpLD can be very sensitive to light levels, and particularly to temperature and volume levels of the immediate environment (Bogdashina, 2003). There is also evidence that a heightened sensitivity to physical contact is a characteristic of some of the SpLDs under consideration in this book.

Because of their heightened sensitivity to sensory stimulation, adults with ADHD are particularly prone to both sensory over- and underload. They are highly sensitive to light, noise, temperature, tactile sensations, odors, and strong tastes. All of these can

have direct influence on their moods, alertness, and performance level—often without the person’s awareness or understanding (Gutman & Szczepanski 2005: 24).

### ***Light, temperature and volume***

When light levels are too bright, they can cause a range of visual distortion problems and ultimately, migraines. Visual distortion may take the form of a perception that text is blurring, shimmering or disappearing, and this makes it impossible to read. Fluorescent lights can also cause problems for some people, to the extent that it becomes impossible to work. Many of us will have experienced discomfort from the flickering that indicates that a light bulb or fluorescent tube is about to die, and this seems to be the kind of effect that people with an SpLD experience regularly, even when others do not perceive it. Natural light is usually the best light to work in, but when that is not possible, ‘natural’ or ‘daylight’ bulbs are available and can alleviate some of the problems mentioned here. Using a coloured overlay or tinted paper can also reduce the glare from black print on white paper; changing the students’ position may be helpful in reducing the reflection of the lights on the whiteboard. If this is a persistent problem, the student might try wearing sunglasses in class, and in the long-term, if funding is available, investigate tinted lenses from a specialist optometrist.

Working in a classroom that is slightly chilly or slightly too warm may seem irritating to many of us, but for those who are hyper-sensitive to temperature, even a small variation may be extremely distracting, or even intolerable. It is worth checking that everybody is comfortable at the start of the lesson, and setting out clearly what etiquette should be followed if an adjustment of temperature is required. This should be designed to avoid conflicts arising from one individual deciding to open a window or adjust the heating, without consulting other members of the class. (It also provides a good opportunity for practising polite social language and negotiating skills!) Although it seems obvious, it may be helpful to suggest to the student that dressing in several layers might be advisable, to allow for individual adjustments to be made as required. Some teachers may feel that advising their students on what to wear is beyond their professional remit, but students with an SpLD may actually welcome some friendly suggestions, if sensitively offered.

Some people who have an SpLD, and who are prone to distraction, find it hard to focus if there is anything moving in their line of vision. The same is true of noise, especially for those individuals who are hypersensitive to volume. Noise coming from outside the classroom may be easy enough for most learners to filter out, but for some learners who have an SpLD it will be distracting, and divert a lot of their attention away from what they are studying. Equally, what may seem to the majority of the class to be the purposeful working ‘hum’ of pairs and small groups discussing topics and practising the target language may be perceived as a cacophony to individuals who are sensitive to volume. If a separate area is available for these students to work in with their partner, this would be an ideal solution, but otherwise, it is important to make sure that the ‘hum’ does not become a ‘roar’, and that the rest of the class are made aware that high volumes are distressing for their classmate.

## ***Furniture***

If the particular SpLD that the student experiences manifests itself with aspects of dyspraxia, it is worth taking into account how the physical layout of the furniture might impact on his or her learning.

Although most modern classrooms are equipped with flat tables that are shared by two or more students, many students will find it more comfortable to lean on a sloping surface when writing. It seems with hindsight that the individual sloping desks of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century schoolrooms had a lot to recommend them, although they were usually arranged rather too rigidly for modern teaching methods. Leaning on a slope enables the writer to keep the hand naturally in the ideal position for clear handwriting, while supporting the wrist and forearm. If a student seems to be having trouble producing clear handwriting, it is worth checking the pen grip and hand position, as it may need adjusting, particularly if the student's first language is written in a different script (Sassoon, 1995). If the pen grip seems to be appropriate, adjusting the slope of the page may also be helpful. Writing slopes are commercially available, but using a ring binder or lever-arch file can work just as well in the short-term.

Personal space is important for some learners who have an SpLD, and sharing a table may not be the ideal situation for some. Students who are having trouble managing their own workspace (juggling a notebook, text book, dictionary, pens, etc.) may find it inhibiting having to share with a neighbour (and their neighbours might also find it uncomfortable). Students who have traits of Asperger's syndrome may find it more natural to work individually, and those with ADHD traits might find it easier to concentrate if they are not too close to other learners. The layout of the classroom depends to a great degree on the physical constraints of the room, of course, but being aware of these issues may enable the teacher to plan the arrangement of the furniture to the best advantage. If it is at all possible, students with Asperger's syndrome or ADHD may appreciate having a designated 'retreat' they can go to if the classroom environment becomes too overwhelming for them; this could be a quiet corner within the classroom or a separate space elsewhere. The procedure for using this space should be agreed at the start of the course and– if appropriate– other members of the class should be made aware of the situation.

## ***Equipment***

Over the last decade or so, the range of equipment available for supporting classroom language teaching in general, and for accommodating disability in particular, has grown enormously. Technological advances have meant that ICT is available in many classrooms, and that electronic devices are not only cheaper, but smaller, more portable and much more sophisticated. However, although new technology can be extremely helpful for learners with an SpLD, and will be discussed in some detail in this section, it is worth remembering that, actually, older paper-based technologies also still have a role to play, and can be a useful back-up when more advanced electronic systems fail.

A characteristic shared by many students who have an SpLD is a weakness in short-term and working memory, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. This means that they are prone to forgetting what work had been set as homework, or to bring particular information or books to class. A simple solution is for the student (or, indeed, all students in the class) to carry a small notebook or diary in which homework can be recorded, by the teacher if necessary, as well as other points to remember. Of course, mobile phones and electronic personal organizers are taking over this role to a large extent in many places, but there is still an argument for the quickly-accessed pocket diary that both teacher and student can write in, even if only as a back-up system. Paper-based materials such as these have a tactile quality that electronic devices lack, and thus contribute to a more multi-sensory experience that benefits many learners. For kinaesthetic learners, one of the most useful learning aids is a set of Cuisenaire rods (plastic or wooden sticks of different lengths, with each length having a different colour), which can be used in many different ways to help strengthen memory and make abstract concepts more concrete. For restless students, for example those with ADHD traits, a Cuisenaire rod is also useful as a 'fiddle peg' to help them concentrate. Other useful 'fiddle pegs' include a lump of blu-tac, a plastic 'tangle' or any other object that can be manipulated silently to keep fidgeting fingers busy and thus help concentration.

If there is access to a computer in the classroom, there are many ways in which it can be used to the benefit of students with an SpLD. Using a basic wordprocessor reduces many of the pressures associated with writing, as Gilroy and Miles (1996) suggest: eliminating worry about neatness of handwriting, enabling easier organization of ideas and correct spelling leads to higher self-esteem and greater confidence. Singleton (1994) also notes that these positive effects of using a computer improve motivation and determination in students who may previously have had negative experiences in the language classroom. Even without specialist software, most computers offer a range of tools that can be useful, such as the facility to change the appearance of text, making it larger, using a different font, or altering the background to reduce the glare. With a scanner connected, any text can be adjusted to suit the learner's preferences. Schneider and Crombie (2003) point out that technology-mediated language learning enhances the students' autonomy; they can work at their own pace, can go back to material as many times as they like, and in some cases are free to access the material at a time that suits them best. This is beneficial for all learners, but particularly for those with an SpLD.

Despite the clear advantages of using a computer, it should be borne in mind that without specialist software packages few word processors are sophisticated enough to differentiate between homophones in English (for example, if a writer types 'there' instead of 'their', the spell checking function is unlikely to highlight it, since it identifies only 'non-words' and not misused words). There are several programs on the market which are more discerning and offer the writer a choice of spelling options, along with the meanings; perhaps the best known in the UK is 'TextHelp', which also incorporates screen-reading software to reduce the cognitive load of accessing information. Voice recognition software enables students to produce text of a high quality without having to worry about spelling, or focussing on the physical demands of either writing or typing. Software that allows learners to plan their work using mindmaps is available in many

formats, some of it as freeware from the internet (e.g. Bubbl.us) and because these programs are very visual and colourful, as well as allowing for frequent changes and development of ideas, they are often very useful for learners with an SpLD.

Small handheld devices are also becoming more sophisticated, so that mobile phones and personal organizers may also have a built-in electronic dictionary which can pronounce words for the learner, and make highquality digital recordings of meetings or lectures that the learner can then access later, thus removing the need for note-taking at the same time as listening, which can be problematic for learners with weaknesses in auditory memory and / or poor motor control. Some digital recorders are also able to play back the recording at a slower pace, to facilitate comprehension. There is also software available that can analyse the recordings into small chunks that can be represented visually on a screen, allowing the student to focus on one small section of an oral text at a time, and even add notes about the content before moving on to the next.

The development of these sophisticated systems has made life a lot easier for many people who have an SpLD, and allowed them to learn alongside their peers who have no apparent SpLD, where before they may have been 'exempted' from language learning (in other words, excluded and not given the same opportunity as their peers). However, even with the full array of technological support available, there is still a need for the language learner to develop effective study skills, and this will be considered later in this chapter.

## **Materials**

Although the choice of materials may be beyond the teacher's control, it may be possible to modify the way in which they are presented to the learners. Ideally, the appearance of materials should cause as little stress as possible; keeping in mind that the learners may be prone to sensory overload or visual disturbances and may find it difficult to focus on too many items at once, it follows that materials should appear uncluttered and easy to navigate. Unfortunately, the current trend in language teaching materials is towards a bright, busy page, mimicking a magazine style. These often feature text printed over an image, with small sections of text arranged in no clear order over the double page spread. This style of textbook can be quite confusing for a learner with a visual processing difficulty, but there are a number of things that the teacher can do to mitigate the problematic aspects of these types of materials.

One option is to produce a 'text window', which can be as simple as cutting a hole in a piece of paper, that is then placed over the page, to block out a lot of the unnecessary information and allow the learners to focus just on the part of the text they need to work with at the time. A more flexible text window can be made by using two 'L' shaped pieces of paper that can be slid apart to change the size of the window.

The most important thing is to always ensure that the text is large enough and in a font that the learner can easily read. A learner having trouble reading text written in fonts at or above 10 point might be wise to seek an eye examination, but many learners with an SpLD will prefer a larger font, at 14 or 16 point, since they find it easier to track the thicker lines, and having larger spaces between the words means that there is less chance



**Figure 6.1** Two types of text window

of them merging. Wider spacing might also be helpful, and the choice of font is crucial, as illustrated in the box below.

Most people agree that a font without serifs (curly additions to the letters) is easier to read than one with serifs.

Compare these words in 12 point Times New Roman – a very commonly used serif font

to these words in 12 point Arial, which appear bigger even at the same point level.

Another element of the font that can be confusing, particularly for learners who are relatively unfamiliar with the Latin script, is the difference between handwritten lower case ‘a’ and the typical print style: ‘a’. Some fonts replicate the handwritten style:

Comic Sans MS is a relatively informal font,

whereas Century Gothic can be used in more formal contexts.

These fonts may be preferred to Times New Roman, and even Arial, in producing materials for language learners.

If the learner does have trouble accessing text because it is not presented in an accessible font, the teacher could consider scanning the pages required and re-formatting them, or even typing out key sections in a more accessible style (keeping copyright law in mind, of course!).

As noted above, the background colour of classroom materials can have a big impact on accessibility for learners with an SpLD, so producing handouts on pastel-tinted paper might be helpful. If the whole class receives coloured handouts, the learners with an SpLD are more likely to feel fully included in the class, and there may be other learners who find that the off-white background reduces the effort required to read the text, even though they have no SpLD identified.

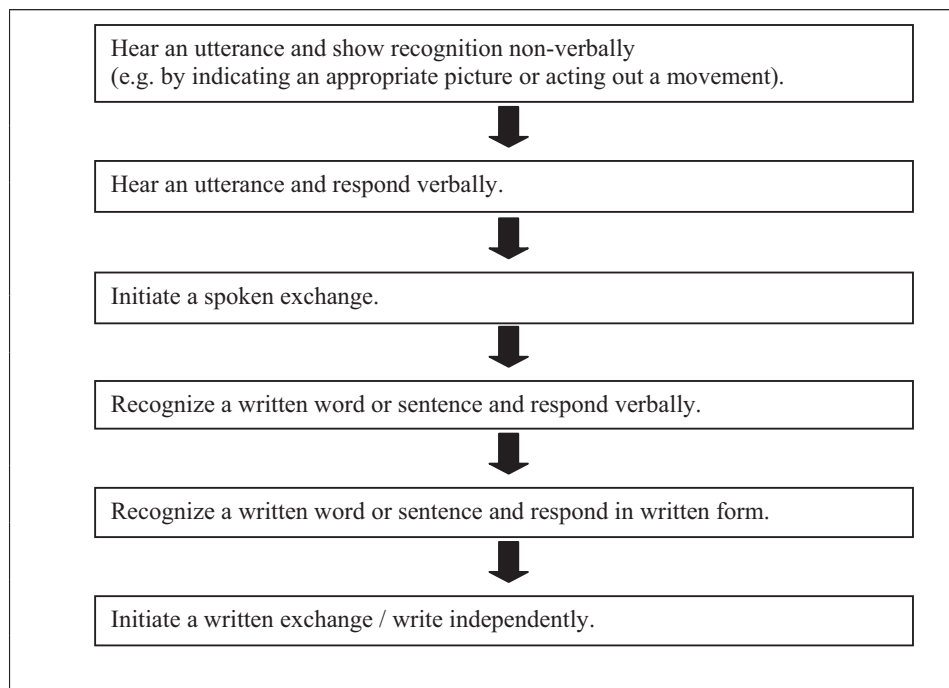


# Curriculum

## *Organization of subject matter*

As noted above, the actual content of the curriculum is usually not decided by the teacher. The way in which the content is presented and organized, however, is arguably the prime responsibility of the classroom teacher. Textbooks are often designed to fit courses of an arbitrary number of weeks' duration, with a certain number of hours taught per week. This design may not, of course, suit every context and it is important that the classroom teacher has the confidence to re-evaluate how much can be covered in each lesson and where breaks should be made, without necessarily following the prescribed pattern laid out in the book. Providing extra activities and materials to allow for additional practice of certain language points is crucial for learners with an SpLD, as it often takes them longer to assimilate new information and transfer it to long-term memory.

The key to enabling this to happen is to provide ample opportunities for 'overlearning' – that is, revisiting the same information in different contexts so that automaticity can be developed through the chunking of single actions or sub skills into one action, that then in turn can become a sub-routine in a more complex task. Schneider and Crombie (2003) recommend working from reception to production and from oral language to written text.



**Figure 6.2** *Recommended progression of tasks*

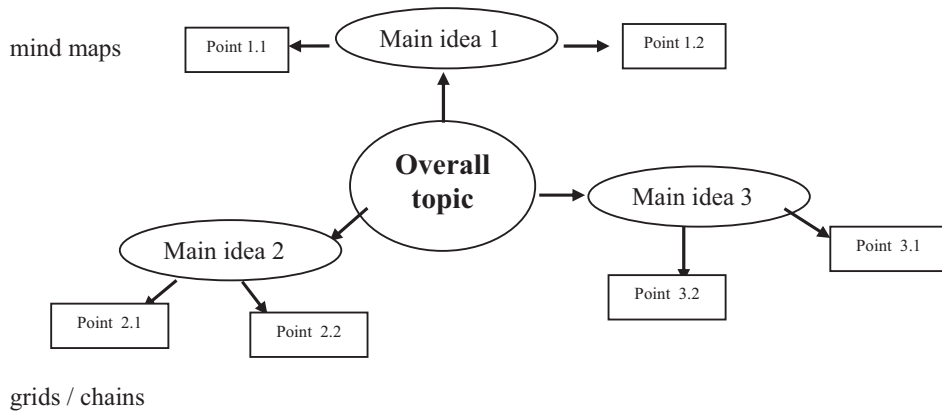
Many teachers now accept that finding out about learners' preferred modes or channels of learning and presenting material in a way that suits them best is an efficient way of working. The disadvantage of this is that, while working to the learners' strengths is clearly advantageous, it does mean that their weaker learning channels are neglected. Moreover, in any class there is likely to be a mix of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learners, as well as the teacher's own preferred modality to take into account. A multi-modal approach is therefore likely to be of most benefit to the class as a whole. Using multi-sensory materials, incorporating audio-visual and tactile materials, enables dyslexic learners to use their stronger input channels and at the same time develop other channels that they may not otherwise use as much. Dunn, Beaudry and Klavas (1989) point to evidence that suggests that learners, with or without an SpLD, who access information through a range of sensory modes are likely to learn more successfully.

Another dimension of learning styles that is useful to consider is the holistic vs. analytical distinction. Holistic learners like to be able to see the bigger picture from the outset of a piece of work, and are unlikely to be able to begin until they know where they are heading. Teachers can help these learners by setting out the structure of the lesson at the start of the session, and setting medium and long-term goals. The use of mind mapping techniques is particularly useful for them, so that they can plan out an entire essay or even a project quite quickly, and use the mindmaps as a framework, working on the parts they feel most comfortable with. These learners are likely to start work on several sections of an essay and move from one to another as ideas occur to them – Chinn (2001) aptly likens these intuitive learners to grasshoppers. On the other hand, the 'inch worms' of the class prefer a more sequential approach to learning, and can be confused by seeing too much of the overall picture at once. Teachers can best help them by setting out clear stages that the lesson will pass through, and breaking large tasks into smaller chunks. For them it is better to look only one step ahead at a time, to focus on each stage and complete it before moving on. For these learners, Mortimore (2008) recommends the use of grids or chains for planning, rather than mindmaps. She suggests encouraging learners to use a simple framework such as: Situation, Problem, Solution, Outcome, which can be adapted to a wide range of text types. These are more formulaic and sequential methods that nevertheless allow for capturing ideas and forward planning of written work.

Another important strategy for facilitating the long-term acquisition of new material is to help the learners make links with other topics and information that they already feel secure about. This is even more effective if they are encouraged to make their own connections and record them visually, or by discussing them with their peers. The connections that learners with an SpLD make might be surprising to their classmates, but that can also be beneficial to the class as a whole, as ideas that seem unusual are more likely to be memorable.

## ***Classroom tasks and assessments***

Whatever tasks are chosen, they should have the potential to provide a lot of opportunities for repetition and revisiting material previously met. Ideally, they should incorporate a range of multi-sensory activities. A clear focus on the phonological / orthographic



**Figure 6.3** Comparison of a mind map and a grid

relationships of the language is essential for many learners with an SpLD who may need a lot of explicit instruction in matching sounds to symbols. The kinds of tasks that are used in class should ideally be reflected in assessments, too, so that there is no additional cognitive burden of learning how to approach the assessment task. A range of evidence of understanding could be accepted, in addition to - or even instead of - more formal written tasks. For example, the students might be asked to produce mindmaps, diagrams, bullet points, pictures, models or even short dramatic performances which demonstrate how much of the target language they have understood and assimilated, without complicating the task by introducing complex literacy practices into it.

## Differentiation

Although much is spoken and written about differentiation, it seems that less is actually implemented in the classroom. Teachers commonly report feeling that they do not have the time to spend with learners who require more attention, and that, if they do support one learner more than another, it is somehow 'unfair' (Smith, 2008). In fact, in order to be fair to all learners, it is necessary to treat them all differently, rather than all the same, and it does not need to be excessively time consuming in the classroom. Effective differentiation can be achieved by considering four dimensions: materials, task, expectation and support.

Differentiating in terms of materials does not mean providing a whole different set of materials for different learners, but rather it is a matter of directing each student's attention to appropriate sections in their books, and to additional exercises if they have practice or workbooks. Teachers might allocate different parts of a given text (or different

texts) to different learners, based upon their reading ability. Students who find reading straightforward should be encouraged to read a follow up text, if available, or to complete more of the written exercises. Students who need longer to process information should be encouraged to complete what the teacher deems to be the minimum necessary for the class, but have the opportunity to work on the same materials at home if they wish. Differentiating materials is of course closely linked to task differentiation, whereby students might be set different amounts of work to complete, or even different tasks completely, using the same materials. An example in an extremely mixed-ability group might be to give a newspaper article to the class, asking some students simply to highlight all the names they can see in the text (i.e. by identifying capitalized words that do not start new sentences), others to read for gist, and others to read for detail. Feedback could consist of asking the first group to say who the text is about, the second group to say what happened, and the third group to supply the details ('when' and 'why'). In that way everybody contributes to the discussion at the level they can work at in the target language. Alternatively, students might be allocated different roles in group work, to work to their strengths. A dyslexic or dyspraxic learner who does not feel very confident with writing could then avoid that task, and concentrate instead on contributing creative ideas to the group task, if that is his/her forte. (A student who has Asperger's syndrome may conversely prefer to be the group scribe or secretary, and record exactly what the others say.)

These two forms of differentiation are also clearly linked to the expectations that teachers have of their learners, and sometimes teachers can be surprised by what learners can accomplish, given the optimum circumstances. On the other hand, it is very disheartening for learners to be constantly asked to achieve what is beyond their ability. Therefore, differentiation of expectation can be used as a means of encouraging students to progress, without setting unachievable goals. This can be accomplished by giving ongoing feedback while students are engaged in an activity, and if the teacher feels that the standard of work is not yet what could be produced, explicit guidelines could be given, for example on the structure of a piece of writing, or the range of vocabulary, or the reading strategies being used. This is where differentiation of support begins, bearing in mind that all individual learners (whether or not they have an SpLD) are likely to require different kinds and levels of support. Some learners need time to concentrate, and work best if left undisturbed; others will forget what the task is or experience a block about getting started – these are the learners who will need more support at the beginning of an activity. Some may need reminding to stick to the topic or the task (as the teacher perceives it, rather than as they do), others may need encouragement with the surface features of writing: spelling or layout.

## Communication

The key to any good practice in language teaching is clear communication, and this is particularly important for students who have an SpLD. As auditory processing may be

slower in some learners, it is even more important to make sure that they understand what is being said as the lesson progresses, with frequent checks of comprehension. If a student does not seem to have understood, it is better to give them a little longer to process the information, and then repeat the same phrase if necessary. Rephrasing should be used only when they have had ample time to process the information and it becomes clear that they do not understand the vocabulary being used. It may be helpful to give important information in both written or graphic and verbal form, so that they have a record that they can refer to at a later date.

## ***Instructions***

Giving clear simple instructions is something that every teacher aims for, but it is – unfortunately – all too easy to pitch the language at too high a level, or to make them more complicated than necessary. In the case of students who have an SpLD, it is essential that there is no ambiguity at all, and if possible it is best to avoid the use of metaphorical language. Students who have traits of Asperger’s syndrome may take everything that is said literally, which can have surprising consequences. One way to improve the clarity of instructions is to invest time in planning them out before the lesson, and even write or type them out and provide copies for those students who find that helpful. In this case, they should be in the form of a list of bullet points, with one action per bullet point. Each action should be explicitly described, and time scales could also be given to guide the learners. Some learners with an SpLD might want to make sure that every step is completed thoroughly before moving on to the next one, and not be aware of the time passing. Once the task or activity has been explained, it should be conducted in the way set out, with changes being avoided as far as possible. Changes of plan due to interruptions (for example, fire drills or visitors) are common in classrooms, but it is much harder for learners with an SpLD to change direction or understand a new set of instructions than it is for most other learners. After an interruption, these learners may need more support in the form of recapping to get back on track with their work.

## ***Feedback***

Students who have an SpLD often appear to perceive the world in a different way from the majority of people and so are able to make connections that others do not readily make. For this reason, when ideas are elicited from the class, it may be that the learners with an SpLD contribute ideas and suggestions that seem slightly tenuous or even totally irrelevant. However, it is important for the teacher to be ready to acknowledge and praise all ideas, even if it is not immediately apparent how they are related to the discussion. Even if the link is not clear to the teacher, other members of the class might benefit from exposure to the different thought patterns and processes that are being demonstrated.

When giving feedback to students with an SpLD on work they have completed or are working on, it is important, as when giving instructions, to be absolutely explicit about which aspects are good, and what needs further work. When suggesting improvements, again, it is important to be very clear, and perhaps even model how the work could be improved.

It is generally accepted that, when giving feedback either in oral or written form, it is good practice to begin with something positive before mentioning something that requires more work, and if possible to end on a positive note, too. Sometimes when giving feedback the desire to be sensitive and encouraging can lead a teacher to be overly positive about the quality of the work, and of course it is important to protect the student's self-esteem. Positive feedback plays an important role in building a learner's self-esteem, which is an essential element of language learning. However, it is better to be open and honest and offer constructive advice and examples of how the work could be improved, than to allow the student to develop an unrealistic view of their proficiency levels.

## ***Self-esteem***

For a learner who has always had difficulty with some of the basic elements of formal education, such as memorizing facts or working with text, it is not hard to imagine that self-esteem might be quite low, particularly where language use and acquisition is concerned. Self-image can also be negatively affected by major life experiences such as the upheaval of migration (particularly relevant to ESL situations where it may be associated with extremely traumatic incidents) and/or changes in socio-economic status. Negative self-image and low self-esteem can manifest in a number of ways, such as behavioural problems (which may be compounded by traits of ADHD or Asperger's syndrome, which can make a student appear uncooperative or disruptive), or simply withdrawing from the classroom environment, either physically or emotionally. Times of transition such as the start of a new school year, or the first weeks in a new institution can be particularly difficult for learners with an SpLD, and this is considered in some detail in Chapter 9. If self-confidence is low, it may negatively affect a student's ability to socialize with unfamiliar people, fearing ridicule and failure in the social setting as well as the academic. Students will often find ways to avoid starting an activity that they do not believe they can succeed at. Teachers need to be sensitive to this, whilst not allowing students to 'exempt' themselves from important learning opportunities. They need to anticipate activities that may present challenges and find ways of setting them up so as to instil confidence in every learner.

For example, reading out loud in class is an activity that is sometimes incorporated into language classes to give learners the opportunity to work on pronunciation without worrying about formulating grammatical sentences themselves. Many learners with an SpLD find reading aloud in their first language extremely stressful and difficult to manage, and the challenge is multiplied when reading in the target language. Although their peers may also mispronounce and trip over words, this is likely to be of little consolation to students who believe themselves to be the worst in the group at reading. Teachers could avoid putting pressure on students in this way by allowing them time to prepare the passage they are to read. All students are likely to benefit from this measure, and pronunciation is likely to improve as a result, since they will have time to read the passage, practise tricky sections and gain an understanding that will enhance the

intonation of their reading. The feeling of success thus generated should enhance self-esteem. Similarly, calling on students to answer questions in a formal manner can be a risky strategy unless the teacher is reasonably sure that the learner can answer the question. It is important to remember that students who have traits of ADHD may not be able to control their emotions as well as most of their agegroup, and their reactions to perceived failure may be more extreme. If possible, it is good practice to allow learners to maintain their public 'face' in front of their peers.

Generally, teachers can help to build confidence and self-esteem by setting tasks that the students are already easily capable of, before then leading them to the next stage and helping them to succeed, with support at first. Small tastes of success can help to motivate and give confidence to all learners, but to those whose egos are especially fragile, this is invaluable. Of course, language learners make mistakes sometimes, and these should come to be seen as learning opportunities if correction is done sensitively. Reformulation of an utterance is a subtle way of acknowledging that it is understood but not quite accurate, and is a very natural way of helping learners to improve. In correcting written work, it may be helpful to the learners to focus on one or two aspects of their work that they need to work on, and not highlight every small error, which can be demoralizing.

## Classroom Management

One very important responsibility that the classroom teacher has is to develop a culture within the group that enables effective learning. Classroom dynamics play a very significant role in the quality of learning that takes place, and although to some extent the learners themselves contribute most to this, the teacher must be alert to the social dynamics in the group, and try as far as possible to facilitate a positive learning environment. This can be done by moderating behaviour, organizing interaction and establishing norms and routines. When working with students who have an SpLD, especially traits of Asperger's syndrome or ADHD, it is sometimes necessary to be more tolerant of some inappropriate behaviour or reactions than would normally be the case. However, it should be made clear to the class from the outset where the boundaries are and what is never acceptable (e.g. aggression, breaking safety rules etc.). Any sanctions in place to counter unacceptable behaviour should be quickly and consistently implemented, but offering immediate rewards for good behaviour may be more effective than punishing poor behaviour, particularly for younger learners. Although it may be a sensitive subject, it can be extremely valuable to inform peers of a classmate's SpLD. If they are aware of the situation they can be more helpful and tolerant than if they do not understand why their classmate seems to be working so slowly or forgetting so much (see Chapter 5 for more on disclosure.)

## Grouping

Pair and small group work has become a standard characteristic of most modern language classrooms, since it maximizes the amount of productive language practice the students experience in each session and develops skills of cooperation. Students seem to naturally gravitate towards people who are most like them in a classroom, and tend to sit in the same seats each lesson, if possible. For the language learner who has an SpLD, there may not be anyone in the group who seems to be very similar, and so there is a danger that this learner may become isolated from the main group. The teacher's responsibility in this case is to ensure that students pair up with different partners on a regular basis, so that they all have the opportunity to work with a range of different personality types and ability levels. Some learners with dyslexia or another SpLD may feel reticent about showing people their writing, or indeed even talking to them, if they do not know them well. Therefore, it is good practice at the start of a course to set up activities in which the learners find out a little about each other and work together in as non-threatening a situation as possible before starting on any serious project in groups. It might even be worth investing some class time in allowing the students to chat informally, if they share a language other than the target language, so as to break down some barriers and help them to form social bonds that will support their learning. In any pair or group activity, the members will fulfil different roles in completing the task, which could be in terms of language proficiency, creativity, or group/task management. The teacher should observe how different pairings or groupings interact, and note which ones seem to be most productive. Providing opportunities for regrouping, which allows relocation around the classroom, can be very helpful for learners who need movement to maintain concentration.

## Routine

Many learners benefit from having a classroom routine, but students with an SpLD might benefit most from knowing exactly what is expected of them at any given time. Establishing a regular pattern to the lesson does not have to mean that it becomes boring and predictable, since the content of each lesson will differ. However, it makes classroom management much easier if there are well-established sub-routines that can be set in motion at various points in the lesson.

In many institutions it is considered good practice to open a lesson with an overview of what will be covered in that session, and to close with a summary of what has been achieved. Some teachers will deal with homework matters at the start of a lesson, or with announcements and administrative issues. These routines become familiar to the group very quickly, and help to provide a framework for the language content. Dividing the lesson into shorter sections with breaks is an effective use of time, since students with an SpLD are likely to have problems maintaining concentration. The most memorable phases of a lesson are the beginnings and endings, and introducing breaks offers additional beginnings and endings, so that more of the lesson content is likely to be retained.



Apart from the timing and structure of the overall lesson, it can be helpful to establish sub-routines for checking written work, for completing activities or for using time between activities. For example, at first students may need to be encouraged to use a dictionary or spellchecker to check their work when they finish, and then to exchange papers with another student who has finished, and to offer constructive feedback to each other before revising their work. Once this pattern has been established, by focussing on the stages explicitly, they can be ‘chunked’ into one checking routine which needs only one prompt from the teacher, or becomes an automatic part of any written task. Knowing what the next step is at any given point allows students to feel secure in the class, and to develop autonomy, by following classroom routines without needing direction from the teacher. This allows the teacher to focus on students who need more individual attention.

### ***Pace***

There is a fine balance to be struck in any language classroom between maintaining a good, stimulating pace, and rushing through the material too quickly for all but the most able learners to assimilate it. Breaking tasks into small chunks is likely to be beneficial for all learners, but particularly, as mentioned above, for the ‘inch worm’ learners who need to assimilate each concept as they meet it before moving on. Allowing learners to work at their own pace through a sequence of tasks has many advantages, as long as the sequence is clear and accessible (i.e. available for learners to refer to as needed), and the predefined progress points to be met by all learners are achievable. Although courses often have time constraints built in, a creative teacher can develop ways of covering the necessary material in the time available, whether this is by prioritizing the most essential topics or structures, setting out self-study tasks to supplement the work done in class, or devising tasks that practise two or more elements at once.

Although a teacher may decide that a group is ready to tackle a particular aspect of the target language, it may be that not all the students are ready to assimilate the concepts involved. It is therefore good practice to develop a spiral structure to a language course, such that topics are returned to frequently, in different contexts, and structures are revisited several times. In this way, there is more chance that each learner will encounter the target structure at a time when s/he is mentally ready to absorb it and relate it to already consolidated language use.

## **Developing Learning Skills**

### ***Study Skills***

Perhaps the most important aspect of developing skills for study is that the strategies need to be taught in context. This is partly because few students will have the luxury of free time to devote to developing their study skills independently of their coursework, but

mostly because many students with an SpLD may respond best to a practical, hands-on approach where they can actually see that the techniques being practised relate directly to their work. There are already many books and resources available on the market that focus on developing good study skills, so only a few key strategies will be highlighted here (references to general study skills texts are given below in the 'Further Reading' section).

Using colour can be helpful for students with an SpLD (or even those with none), if they are strongly visual learners. For example, at a macro level, using different colours (of text, folders or paper) for different subjects or modules might help them to remember what work needs to be done for which class. At a micro level, using different colours for different parts of the language can help to reinforce patterns that they might otherwise not perceive so strongly (see Chapter 7 for more details). In addition, for learning vocabulary, colouring words by function (verb, noun, adjective, etc.) allows the learner to see common endings, and the colour may act as a visual trigger to enable retrieval of the correct form of the word at a later stage. These strategies for learning can be introduced to the whole class, and may be helpful to many learners regardless of whether they have an identified SpLD.

One aspect of study skills that is often overlooked is time management, which many people with an SpLD find difficult; not only do some not seem to perceive the passing of time accurately, but there is a tendency to underestimate how long a task might take to complete, commonly coupled with a slower processing speed which means that most tasks will take longer than they will for classmates with no apparent SpLD. Explicit coaching in organizing their work and planning their time may be required, using timetables, personal organizers, mobile phones, diaries and whatever other means the student feels comfortable with. When an assessment task is set, deadlines should be clearly specified and it may also be helpful to map out a timetable of stages that need to be completed, working backwards from the deadline (e.g. for an assignment, the planning, reading, drafting and checking stages could all be laid out, as in Figure 6.4 below).

Learning styles preferences need to be acknowledged in the development of effective study skills, as do natural work rhythms (an individual's best times of day for concentration), the environmental considerations noted at the beginning of this chapter, and any other personal responsibilities that a learner may have, especially for adult learners. To begin with, it is probably best to allow students to work within their comfort zones as far as learning style is concerned, while always seeking to enlarge that zone by introducing new techniques drawing on different learning styles in a scaffolded situation, such as a tutorial or workshop. In particular, one of the most important study skills that a dyslexic learner can be encouraged to make use of is a metacognitive approach.

## ***Metacognitive Thinking Skills***

'Metacognitive' loosely means 'about thinking', so these techniques are ways of exploring how we are thinking and learning, making the process explicit so that we can examine it, discuss it and improve it where possible. Reid (1998) describes this as developing self-awareness and self-monitoring of the learning process so as to develop greater control

**ESSAY TITLE: 'My country.'**

**Describe the country you come from, comparing the cities, countryside, food and customs to this country. Include pictures and diagrams.**

**Due Date:  
March 25th**

TASK	ACTION	DATE TO BE DONE
PLAN ESSAY	Look at title and highlight key words. Identify main task. Identify useful sources of information. Plan using mind map or chain.	January 20th
RESEARCH	Go to library and find sources, e.g. map of my country / official statistics.	January 21st
FIRST DRAFT	Start writing the main sections.	February 4th
INTRODUCTION AND CONCLUSION	Revise the main sections and add the introduction and conclusion.	February 18th
SECOND DRAFT	Revise the whole essay, checking for accuracy.	March 4th
FINAL PROOF READING	Ask a classmate or tutor to look through the essay to check for spelling errors.	March 20th
PRINTING	Print out copies and collate.	March 24th
HAND IN	Take 2 copies of assignment and CD of additional material to school office.	March 25th

**Figure 6.4** *Help with time management – mapping out a study schedule from the deadline backwards*

over it. He advocates thinking out loud as one possible technique to facilitate this, and certainly this is one method that a tutor could use to model metacognitive strategies. Retrieving information, which students may have assimilated into their long-term memory, can be challenging for learners with an SpLD, and so they may need a method of working through the process each time. Schneider and Crombie (2003: 26) recommend developing an approach to compensate for auditory and visual weaknesses that they describe as an 'inner self-correction dialogue'. This is perhaps what adult learners should be aiming for, although in the early stages it may help to audibly vocalize the train of thought.

Essentially, the learner needs to become aware of the steps taken in reaching a particular decision in solving a problem, whether that be in choosing to use an article ('a' or 'the') before a noun phrase, or to use present perfect instead of simple past. While many learners of English struggle with these particular aspects of the language, there are rules that can be followed which in the majority of cases will lead to an appropriate choice. Most advanced learners will internalize these rules and thus the decision-making becomes automatic – they may even be unable to articulate why they have chosen a particular usage, citing 'gut feeling' as their guide. For learners with an SpLD who may find it harder to develop this automaticity, it may be beneficial to develop routines that enable them to work out the answer each time, and check their choices. This may involve asking themselves questions such as 'Have I come across this situation before?' 'How did I

resolve it last time?’ ‘What options are available to me?’ ‘What are the main factors I need to take into account?’ and ‘Does my choice of language use work in the context of the whole text?’

The language teacher can help to develop these metacognitive thinking strategies by modelling the thinking process (as in the example below), eliciting what the student already knows and asking questions that should lead to the correct choice. It is also useful as a diagnostic strategy to discover where the problems are encountered; working through these questions may highlight areas that need additional practice.

Example text:

To make toffee apple. Make a toffee using sugar butter and syrup. Take a apple. Get a long stick. Put stick in to apple. Put apple in to toffee, cover it all. Let it get hard.

Example of the meta-cognitive process of checking article usage:

To make toffee apple.  
*Is it one apple? Or many? If many, how do we show that? → ‘+s’*  
*If only one, how do we show ‘one’? → ‘a’*

Make a toffee using sugar butter and syrup.  
*Can we count toffee? Or is it uncountable like sugar and butter?*  
*If it is like sugar and butter, do we need ‘a’?*  
*What other word could we use here? → ‘some’*

Take a apple.  
*Just one apple at a time, so ‘a’ is right.*  
*Does it sound easy to say?*  
*Why not? How could we make it easier? → ‘an’*

Get a long stick.  
*Just one stick at a time, so ‘a’ is right.*  
*Does it sound easy to say? That’s OK then.*

Put stick in to apple.  
*Do we know which stick, and which apple?*  
*If we do, how do we show that? → ‘the’*

Put apple in to toffee, cover it all.  
*Do we know which apple, and which toffee?*  
*If we do, how do we show that? → ‘the’*

Let it get hard.

Linked to this is the development of explicit memorization techniques such as mnemonics and visualization. Through discussion, learners can be encouraged to set up their own mnemonics (see the example in Chapter 7) or to state how they remember something they have already learnt, looking for connections to things they still need to learn, and to discern patterns in the language that they may not have noticed, but which may help them to use a structure more accurately. All of these techniques can have a dramatic effect on the learners’ rate of progress in acquiring the target language; success – and the accompanying boost to self-esteem – is extremely motivating.

This chapter has considered how to develop a learning environment that can benefit language learners with an SpLD. In the next chapter some specific teaching strategies and techniques are outlined that can be implemented in any language classroom.

### Summary of key points

- It is the classroom teacher's responsibility to ensure that the physical, social and academic conditions are optimal for language learning for all students, taking into account the specific needs of those in the group who have an SpLD.
- The physical environment, including the furniture, materials and equipment, may not always be entirely within the control of the classroom teacher, but even if the resources are not ideal, they should be utilized in the best way possible to cater for the needs of the group members.
- Even if the curriculum is set by external agencies or determined by outside factors, the classroom teacher can usually have some control over the way in which materials are presented and can differentiate activities to suit learners in terms of task, material, expectation and support given.
- Communication needs to be clear and unambiguous at all times, and important information should preferably be made available in more than one mode (e.g. oral and written).
- Feedback should be given in such a way that it helps to foster a positive self-image and does not knock a learner's confidence in their abilities.
- Teachers can help learners with an SpLD succeed by being aware of how the classroom dynamics are helping or hindering an individual, setting up and maintaining routines and adjusting the syllabus to ensure that plenty of recycling of target language structures and additional practice is possible.
- Language teachers should also try to incorporate more general learning strategies into the syllabus, whereby learners can develop effective study skills and metacognitive techniques in the context of their studies. These will help them not only succeed at language learning, but also in other areas of their lives.

### Activities

- 1) Assess your own teaching style (or work in a small group and assess each other's), considering the amount of emphasis on visual, auditory and kinaesthetic elements of teaching.
- 2) Discuss to what extent a teacher's teaching style can or should be modified to accommodate the different learning styles in the classroom. What would the practical and psychological implications be of modifying one's teaching style?
- 3) Reflect on any class you have taught that included a student who may have had an SpLD. What small changes in classroom management could have made a difference to that learner?
- 4) What barriers are there to implementing changes in classroom management to accommodate learners with an SpLD? How can they be overcome?

## Further reading

Cottrell, S. (2001). *Teaching Study Skills and Supporting Learning*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Schneider, E. & Crombie, M. (2003). *Dyslexia and Foreign Language Learning*. London: David Fulton Publishers