Quick Reference Guide:

World Language Learning for Students with Disabilities

All types of learners, regardless of disability status, benefit from world language education, and all students should have the opportunity to acquire linguistic and cultural proficiency in at least one language in addition to English. Educators must therefore be prepared to provide appropriate supports and accommodations to ensure the accessibility of world language education for students with and without disabilities.

Disabilities and World Language Learning
Some students with disabilities (SWDs) may experience difficulties when learning a new language. Different types of disabilities can impact language learning in different ways, and students may have multiple disabilities that contribute to language learning difficulties. It is therefore important to accommodate individual needs of students with disabilities in world language classrooms and tailor supports to their specific learning challenges. Students with neurological impairments involving the use of memory may struggle with developing oral language proficiency and literacy skills, remembering multi-step instructions, and integrating new information with prior knowledge. Language learning may also be impacted by communication impairments to both expressive and receptive skills, including weak phonological processing skills that may cause difficulties with decoding, pronunciation, and comprehension. Dyslexia’s impact on language learning is widely recognized in both research and practice, and students with dyslexia often struggle with handwriting, notetaking, and developing fluency in reading and writing. Some languages may be more accessible than others to students with dyslexia. Various other disabilities may impact language learning, such as for: (1) students with autism who may struggle with processing verbal information, participating in group activities, or responding to changes in routine; and (2) students with ADD/ADHD who may struggle with organization, focus, and working independently. Educators working with SWDs must implement the student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP), which may include providing the student with specially designed instruction or specific related services that enable the student to progress effectively. The following table presents potential ways that educators can support SWDs in the language classroom.

Strategies

*Addressing Specific Learning Challenges*

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| **Challenge** | **Potential Strategies** |
| Producing speech and anxiety | Smaller groups; additional think time; non-verbal communication options |
| Hearing or processing sounds | Limited noise; explicit instruction in identifying/distinguishing/understanding sounds |
| Reading  | Color-coding; mnemonic devices; repeated pronunciation practice; multi-sensory vocabulary practice; shape-based learning of various sounds and words |
| Maintaining attention | Limited noise; redirecting attention; support for identifying main ideas |
| Memorization | Multimodal instructions; limited tasks requiring memorization; review and repetition; leveraging background knowledge |
| Need for routine | Clear classroom procedures and expectations; resources such as daily agendas, checklists, and explicit scoring rubrics |
| Processing visual information and/or text | Multimodal instruction; color-coding; limiting text per page; mnemonic devices; modified fonts; tracking devices |
| Recognizing grammatical patterns | Visuals; graphic organizers; short and simple sentences |
| Social interactions | Alternative seating arrangements; purposeful pairing for collaborative work; non-verbal communication options |

Effective Instructional Approaches

Curriculum, instruction, and assessment should be adapted to ensure an inclusive educational experience for all students, and educators should incorporate a variety of learning activities that reflect individual students’ needs and the needs of their classroom. A supportive, encouraging, and welcoming learning environment is essential for SWDs, and students should be provided with ample opportunities to feel successful in their language learning. Standards-, proficiency-, and assets-based approaches to instruction and assessment are recommended, and SWDs may benefit from alternative forms of assessment such as portfolios that allow them to demonstrate knowledge of the target language in multiple ways. Multimodal teaching methods may also be helpful when working with this population of learners, and educators are encouraged to present information using multiple modalities (e.g., visual, auditory, tactile, etc.) to support students with different disabilities and impairments. It is important to consider how SWDs can benefit from various universal design (UD) principles, including equitable use; flexibility in use; simple and intuitive; perceptible information; low physical effort; size and space for approach and use; and instructional climate.[[1]](#footnote-1) Students with certain disabilities may need explicit, highly structured instruction when learning various features of the language, and educators delivering this type of instruction in the target language should use short, simple sentences, provide visuals and graphic organizers to support student understanding, and review or repeat content as needed.

Recommendations for Students with Disabilities

* Provide accommodations to address students’ individual needs rather than specific diagnoses
* Establish clear classroom procedures and routines to help students internalize classroom expectations
* Use multimodal instruction to support different types of learners in the classroom
* Provide additional time for students to prepare for and participate in activities
* Review and repeat directions to ensure students’ understanding of task expectations
* Use short, simple sentences when providing instructions in the target language
* Incorporate visual supports to enhance students’ understanding of classroom content
* Use teaching materials and activities designed for students with varying strengths and weaknesses
* Implement instructional practices that allow students to show what they can do with the language
* Use alternative assessment tasks to provide multiple ways of demonstrating knowledge and proficiency
* Extend modifications used in instruction to classroom-based assessment practices
* Encourage students to participate in goal-setting and progress-monitoring through self-assessment
* Collaborate with special education teachers and service providers within your school and district
* Check your District Curriculum Accommodation Plan (DCAP) for suggested strategies or accommodations
* Advocate for opportunities, time, and resources that support co-teaching and collaboration with special education providers
* Participate in school or district meetings related to world language policies and accessibility for SWDs
* Take opportunities to grow your knowledge of best practices for working with SWDS, including:
	+ Adapting world language instruction for students with Individualized Education Programs
	+ Implementing inclusive methods of instruction and assessment in the classroom
	+ Identifying or developing curricula and materials that support all types of learners

For more research and a full bibliography for this and other QRG topics, see

[World Language Standards Literature Review Report](https://www.doe.mass.edu/worldlanguages/leader-network/literature-review.docx).

1. Scott, S. & Edwards, W. (2018). *Disability and world language learning: Inclusive teaching for diverse learners*. Rowman & Littlefield. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)