

Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities: A Christian Imperative

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We have all had students in our classes who, for one reason or another, struggle to learn a foreign language. No matter how hard they work, no matter how many hours they spend with a tutor or in our offices, they just do not seem to ‘get it.’ It is very possible that these students have some kind of learning disability, or AD(H)D, which impedes their learning. If these students have a documented learning disability, they are eligible for certain accommodations, depending on the nature of their disabilities (e.g. extended time on tests, distraction-free environment for test-taking, etc.). In the last ten years, more and more students with documented learning disabilities have been entering our institutions; these are students who, thirty years ago, would never have attempted college. According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Feb. 4, 2000), two decades ago, one in thirty-three college freshmen reported having a disability. In 2000 the ratio was one in eleven.

Other struggling students might not meet the specific criteria for a learning disability label, thereby making them ineligible for special accommodations. This latter group often includes students who have developed such excellent coping strategies that it is not until they encounter a foreign language in college that they begin to fail, because their strategies are no longer sufficient to do the task required.

The Americans with Disabilities Act [ADA] is a federal mandate that requires institutions to offer instruction in a way that provides a level playing field for all students.¹ This, in itself, is a powerful legal reason to examine our methods of instruction, but I would argue that, as Christians, we should be in the forefront of providing alternative instructional methods for students who struggle to learn a foreign language. We believe that each person is created in the image of God, and therefore has worth.

If we look at the scope of Scripture, we see that God's original good intent for his creation was that all people would be able to learn without impediment. As a result of humanity's fall into sin, however, things have gone awry, with sin corroding every aspect of God's good creation, even the area of learning and cognition. One example of this brokenness, I believe, is learning disabilities. In Jesus Christ redemption has come to our creation and as God's people here on earth, we are called to be part of the renewal begun in Jesus' life, death and resurrection – a renewal which will be complete when Jesus comes again in glory. Our task here on earth is to work out the implications of redemption in our arena of creation: foreign language education.

Let me be very clear: I am NOT saying that an individual person's learning disability is a result of the individual's own sin; rather, it is a result of the overall sinful human condition. An analogous example would be a person who becomes sick with diabetes or some other illness – this disease is not the result of the given person's own direct sinfulness, but is a part of the effects of the fall on all of creation; sin has become insidiously intertwined with all aspects of our daily living, and all of these areas need renewal.

I also want to make a clear distinction between learning *disabilities* and learning *differences*. In an unfallen world there might still be learning differences (e.g. some people having a stronger auditory mode than a visual mode), but these would be differences in learning style, not disadvantages which impede learning. I am arguing that learning *disabilities* are the result of our overall fallen human condition. If our task in the Kingdom is one of restoration and renewal, how does that play out in our foreign language teaching?

I believe that students who struggle to learn a foreign language *can* succeed in such learning – but that the method of instruction needs to be changed. This is the area where I have been working to be an agent for God's restoration and renewal in this world. I believe that struggling students learn a foreign language best in a multisensory, highly structured environment, which has a strong metacognitive component. Phonology and orthography (as well as semantics and syntax) must be explicitly taught.

The 'communicative approach,' is still quite popular with foreign language educators. Although it has been undergoing some changes, it generally had very little focus on form, something which is extremely unhelpful for many struggling students. In order to be successful, these students need a clear focus on the areas of phonology, semantics and syntax. The specifics of these three areas would be material for several papers, but let me give one example — a student with dyslexia.

This student struggles with sound–symbol correspondences in English, and has probably managed to get by, until confronted with a college foreign language requirement. This student’s difficulty of putting a sound and symbol together is compounded when an entirely new phonological system is introduced in the college foreign language class. Many of these students also have a slow auditory processing speed. One can quickly see how the communicative method fails such students. They can not separate sound segments, so as to break down the speech stream; they have trouble putting sounds and symbols together to form meaning; and their auditory processing is so slow that they quickly get left behind in the dust, never figuring out what the professor is saying in class. Frustration quickly sets in.

Dyslexic students need explicit instruction in how sounds and symbols get put together in the target language. They need to be shown how the target language is similar to and different from their native language. They need to have difficult words broken down into individual sound segments. They need frequent repetition. They need to be able to *feel* with their bodies where the stress falls in a given word. One method I use is giving students a rubber band and have them stretch the band for each syllable, stretching it the farthest at the point in the word where the stress falls.

I would encourage NACFLA readers to give serious consideration to how we as Christians can meet the learning needs of all of our students; this is a biblical imperative that we simply cannot ignore. So often we focus all of our attention on our stronger students, because they are good language learners like ourselves; but it is our weaker students, the ‘widows and orphans’ who really need our help. We, who understand the biblical vision of the redemption of all of creation (including the renewal of our cognitive functions), should be leaders in this area, to show the rest of the academy what our students really can achieve with a method of instruction that is appropriate for them. This would be carrying out the New Testament vision of the Kingdom work begun in Jesus Christ; this would be our partnership in the Gospel.

NOTES

¹ 1973 – Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act – “no otherwise qualified person with a disability in the U.S.....shall, solely on the basis of disability, be denied access to..... any program or activity by any institution receiving federal financial assistance.” According to Jane E. Jarrow in *Title by Title: The ADA’s Impact on Postsecondary Education*. (Columbus: Association on Higher Education and Disability, 1992), p. 2, “....[even] if you don’t receive your operating funds from the federal government, you may not discriminate on the basis of disability.”