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Techniques for Language Teaching

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Introduction

In this chapter we will outline language teaching methods that can enhance the success of language learning of students with an SpLD. The methods and techniques we describe here can be used both in foreign and in second language settings. In applying these teaching techniques it is important to keep in mind that teaching learners with an SpLD needs to follow the same basic pedagogical principles as general good teaching practice which is appropriate in the given context. We believe that the role of the teacher in working with students with SpLDs is best conceived as a facilitator who provides assistance and guidance to the students not only to learn the language, but also to learn about how language works and to learn through using the language (Halliday, 1993).

We will start this chapter with a detailed description of the multi-sensory structured learning approach, which is one of the most widely applied methods in teaching reading and spelling skills in English as L1 and in foreign language education for students with an SpLD. This teaching method, however, is also suited for second language learning contexts and is an excellent example of how students can learn the language as well as learn about the language at the same time. In the subsequent sections we will demonstrate how the principles of this approach can be applied in teaching grammar and vocabulary as well as the four skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Multi-sensory teaching methods

One of the most frequently recommended teaching methods for dyslexic language learners is the so-called multi-sensory structured learning (MSL) approach, which was developed by Sparks et al. (1991) based on the dyslexia remedial programme of Gillingham and Stillman (1960) (for recent descriptions of the applications of the MSL approach in foreign language teaching, see Nijakowska, 2010; Schneider & Crombie, 2004; Schneider & Evers, 2009). Gillingham and Stillman (1960) built on the pioneering work of Orton, who was one of the first researchers to devise a systematic reading instruction programme for dyslexic students. The Orton-Gillingham (OG) approach, as it became known, gives children explicit and direct teaching in sound-letter correspondences and activates different sensory channels simultaneously. The OG approach is highly structured, proceeds in small and cumulative steps and provides dyslexic learners with sufficient practice and revision opportunities. Its aim is to develop children’s phonemic, morphological and syntactic awareness, and thereby help them to acquire reading and spelling skills. The OG approach has a large number of variations such as the Alpha to Omega programme (Hornsby et al., 1999), the Hickey Multi-sensory Language Course (Combley, 1977), and the Bangor Dyslexia Teaching System (Miles, 1989), which all share the basic principles of the original OG approach.

As its name suggests, the MSL approach teaches elements of the L2 (the sound and spelling system, vocabulary and grammatical structures) through the activation of auditory, visual, tactile and kinaesthetic pathways. For example, when learning a new word, students repeat the word several times after the teacher (auditory channel), draw a...
picture to facilitate memorization (visual channel) and act it out (kinaesthetic channel). The parallel use of several sensory channels facilitates encoding in memory for two main reasons. Firstly, the active use of senses in the learning process makes the event of learning memorable and enjoyable, and consequently aids anchoring information in the memory not only for students with an SpLD but also for learners with no apparent learning difficulties. Secondly, as described in Chapter 4, many students with an SpLD have weaker phonological processing skills, and, as a result, have difficulties encoding verbally presented information. If, however, they have the opportunity to learn through additional sensory channels, their weaknesses in phonological processing can be counterbalanced.

The MSL approach also takes another important characteristic of students with an SpLD into consideration, namely their general difficulties in committing verbal information to long-term memory. Learning another language requires the memorization of different types of verbal information: sound sequences, letter combinations, words, phrases and larger linguistic constructions, which might be particularly challenging for learners with an SpLD, whose phonological short-term memory might be able to hold less information than that of their peers. Nevertheless, they can succeed in encoding these elements of language in their long-term memory if they are presented in small units and are practised extensively in different settings. Progress in small steps and overlearning are, therefore, key components of the MSL approach. The MSL approach stresses the importance of practising different aspects of the L2 until they become automatic, yet learning is not boring and monotonous due to the application of a large variety of multi-sensory teaching and learning tasks.

The MSL approach also places emphasis on the demonstration and practice of the use of language learning strategies (Schneider & Crombie, 2004), which are ‘techniques, approaches or deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate the learning, recall of both linguistic and content area information’ (Chamot, 1987: 71). Although students with no apparent SpLD also benefit from learning strategy training (see e.g. O’Malley, 1987), they are more likely to be able to find the strategies that suit the learning task as well as their learning styles and personality without guidance. Students with an SpLD, however, need assistance in applying learning strategies, organizing their learning and controlling their feelings in the learning process. Therefore, it is of great importance that teachers provide different examples of cognitive strategies that aid the memorization of new linguistic material and the inferring of information from the input such as reading and listening strategies, as well as metacognitive strategies that help students to plan and monitor their learning processes (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990). Additionally, the modelling of affective strategies, such as rewarding oneself when completing a task, might assist language learners with an SpLD to overcome any anxiety and stress they might experience. Learners also need opportunities to experiment with learning strategies and should be encouraged to find the techniques that match their individual strengths and weaknesses. Once students have found the appropriate learning strategies, it is advised that teachers monitor how the learners apply these strategies until they can use them autonomously.
An additional element of MSL is the use of dynamic assessment (Ganschow & Schneider, 2000), which is a form of continuous classroom assessment that teachers apply to adjust the learning materials and the pace of learning to the progress of the students. Dynamic assessment is not only a method of testing what students have acquired, but it also provides a means to help students develop learner autonomy. Ganschow and Schneider (2000) list five stages of the teaching process that are based on dynamic assessment (see Figure 7.1). In the first two stages the teacher elicits information from the students and instead of giving direct feedback on whether the answer was correct or not, guides the students through the process of discovering the solution to the task. For example, the teacher might want to elicit the spelling of the word ‘cut’ from the students, who initially spell it as ‘kut’. The teacher does not correct the spelling directly, but asks the learners to remember how other words beginning with the /k/ sound (e.g. cat, cup) are spelt and highlights the vowel that follows the /k/ sound. This process helps students discover sound-letter correspondences and regularities in the spelling system, and thereby develops their metalinguistic awareness. The next stage involves the explicit comparison of the linguistic structure to be learnt in the target language with the learners’ L1. Although this might not always be feasible in multilingual classrooms and in situations where the teacher does not speak the students’ L1, contrasting L1 and L2 linguistic patterns might

![Figure 7.1](image-url)

*Figure 7.1  Stages of the teaching process using dynamic assessment*
Techniques for Language Teaching

Techniques for Language Teaching promote learners’ understanding of the phonological, syntactic and morphological structure of the L2. In the final two stages, learning strategies are taught and practised, and learners are given explicit guidance on how to organize and review the material they have acquired.

Despite the fact that the MSL approach shares a number of similarities with general language teaching methods, it also has a few distinctive features. One of these is the direct and explicit teaching of the L2 rule system, which is very different from communicative language pedagogies, which provide learners with ample communicative opportunities and input and expect them to deduce regularities of the language from these encounters with the L2. Students with an SpLD tend to have difficulties in finding linguistic regularities both in their L1 and in L2, hence they need explicit explanation at all levels of the L2 linguistic system: phonology, spelling, morphology and syntax. In foreign language contexts where the teacher shares the language of the students, the L1 of the learners can be used to facilitate the understanding of rules and regularities and to teach word meanings, whereas in second language settings, this often might not be possible.

Another important difference between current language teaching methods and the MSL approach is the use of drills, which are simple substitution exercises used for practising grammatical structures. Drills focus on one particular aspect of L2 grammar at a time and require learners to carry out minimal structural changes in an utterance. For example, when teaching how to answer yes-no questions, the teacher presents the question ‘Do you like apples?’ and students have to answer either ‘Yes, I do’ or ‘No, I don’t’ depending on their individual likes and dislikes. In a drill the teacher would repeat the same question with different types of food ten to fifteen times until the students are able to provide a grammatically accurate answer. This type of drilling, which has somewhat fallen out of use in modern language classrooms, due to its perceived lack of communicative value, provides language learners a sentence frame that they can memorize and use with minimal changes, and thereby helps the acquisition of syntactic and morphological system of the L2.

If we review Table 7.1, which summarizes the basic principles of the MSL approach, we can see that the majority of the principles are similar to the general characteristics of good practice in language teaching (Turner, 2001). Indeed, teaching languages to students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7.1 Basic principles of the MSL approach (based on Schneider &amp; Evers, 2009)</th>
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<td>• multi-sensory</td>
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<td>• frequent revision</td>
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<td>• explicit explanation of linguistic structures</td>
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<td>• ample practice, drills</td>
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with an SpLD does not require radically different methods and techniques from the ones used in mainstream language classrooms. The main differences between teaching languages to learners with an SpLD and students with no learning difficulties lies in the importance of explicit teaching of linguistic structures, slower pace of progress and frequent revision.

There is substantial research evidence that supports the effectiveness of MSL instruction. In a series of pioneering studies, Sparks and his colleagues (Sparks et al., 1992; Sparks & Ganschow, 1993) investigated how components of L1 and L2 learning aptitude develop as a result of classroom instruction using the MSL method. They found that participants made more significant gains in aptitude measures if they received MSL instruction both in L1 (English) and in L2 (Spanish). This finding highlights the importance of developing students’ L1 language skills parallel to L2 teaching, as abilities in the native language are important foundations for L2 acquisition. In a later study, Sparks et al. (1998) also analysed how the MSL method affects the acquisition of L2 speaking and writing skills. Their results revealed that the dyslexic learners of Spanish participating in an MSL programme outperformed dyslexic learners who received traditional classroom instruction. Moreover, the linguistic gains of the control non-dyslexic group, which was also instructed using traditional language teaching methods, were not significantly different from the improvement the dyslexic MSL group made. Similar findings were obtained by Downey et al. (2000) in the case of students who studied Latin with the help of the MSL programme.

The success of the MSL programme was also proven for other languages such as English, the orthographic system of which is considerably less transparent than that of Latin or Spanish. Nijakowska’s (2008) experiment, in which Polish dyslexic students’ English spelling and reading skills were developed in a small group setting, showed considerable improvement in the targeted aspects of L2 competence. Even if Nijakowska’s study only involved a small number of participants, and thus has limited generalizability, it indicates that the dyslexic students who participated in a six month-long MSL programme made significantly more progress than non-dyslexic learners in the traditional classroom context.

**Teaching the sound and spelling system of the L2**

The principles of MSL teaching play a central role in teaching L2 spelling and pronunciation. Learners with an SpLD greatly benefit from explicit explanations on how to pronounce sounds, and on how sounds correspond to letters and spelling rules. Hence it is useful to demonstrate how the vocal apparatus is used to produce specific sounds and give learners practice opportunities to experiment with the new sounds of the L2. It is also important to provide explicit teaching on how sounds correspond to letters, especially if the orthographies of the L1 and L2 differ, and if the spelling system of the L2 is non-transparent. Although teaching sound-letter correspondences, in other words, phonics, is usually done in L1 literacy classes, the teaching of spelling is a neglected aspect of foreign language pedagogy. The English spelling system is often regarded as irregular, but in fact, there are a number of rules which might assist learners to cope with spelling. A useful list of such rules with examples can be found on
http://www.dyslexia.org/spelling_rules.shtml. It has to be acknowledged, however, that the spelling of a large number of words need be rote-learned (Ziegler & Goswami, 2006). Mnemonic exercises such as remembering the spelling of ‘because’ through the phrase: ‘Big Elephants Can Always Understand Small Elephants’, or the use of drawings that incorporate the letters that make up the word, can greatly aid the memorization of these words (see Figure 7.2). Students with an SpLD also benefit from activities that raise their phonological awareness in the L2, such as segmenting words into syllables and sounds, adding and deleting sounds and syllables in a word and differentiating different sounds (Nijakowska, 2010 provides excellent examples of these activities).

In order to avoid students confusing similar sounds, or letters that look similar, it is advised that similar sound-letter correspondences and similar letters are taught in separate and non-consecutive sessions. For example, if students need to learn the orthography of the Latin alphabet, the letters ‘p’ and ‘g’, ‘d’ and ‘b’ and ‘u’ and ‘n’ should not be introduced together. Sound-letter correspondences such as the pronunciation of the letter combination of ‘oa’ and ‘oo’ can also be mixed up easily by learners with an SpLD (Schneider & Evers, 2010).

Extensive practice using multi-sensory techniques is of key importance in teaching L2 spelling and pronunciation. Activities that help learners anchor new information in memory through the use of different sensory channels, as well as practice tasks that involve movement and visualization are greatly beneficial. Students with an SpLD can memorize letters by tracing them into the air, making model letters from clay or drawing

![Figure 7.2 Illustration of visual techniques that can help memorizing words](image-url)
them on sand (Schneider and Evers, 2009). Additionally, students can be helped to associate letters with sounds through movements and drawing. For example, in order to remember the letter ‘o’ students can be asked to act throwing a ball (which looks like the letter ‘o’), and for the letter ‘c’ they can draw a cat, the back of which forms the letter ‘c’. Finger tapping and clapping can also aid learners to count the number of syllables or sounds in a word. Spelling activities in which students manipulate letter cards or blocks with letters or syllables printed on them, such as combining letters or syllables to form words, deleting or adding letters or syllables, changing the order of letters or syllables, stimulate different sensory channels and make practice activities more memorable and enjoyable (for examples see Nijakowska, 2010). These cards and blocks can be colour-coded either to highlight potentially difficult sounds or spelling, to focus learners’ attention on a specific letter combination, or to differentiate vowels from consonants. A plethora of word-spelling games, interactive tasks teaching sound and letter correspondences and spelling regularities, and games that raise students’ awareness of syllable structure are available on the internet that can provide additional in-class or out of school practice for students with an SpLD (e.g. http://www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/words/spelling/; http://www.woodlands-junior.kent.sch.uk/interactive/literacy.html#7; http://cambridgeenglishonline.com/Phonetics_Focus/). These computer games are also an enjoyable means of practising and automatizing spelling and involve different sensory channels.

Frequent revision of sound-letter correspondences, spelling rules and irregular words (which need to be memorized as a unit) also promotes the development of students’ spelling skills. Playful activities such as word-dominoes and memory games can be used for revision as they break the monotony of spelling tasks. Finally, it is useful if students keep a record of spelling rules with examples and a list of the words to be rote-learned because they can refer to it when working on their own.

**Teaching vocabulary**

As mentioned in Chapter 4, students with an SpLD may find it particularly difficult to acquire L2 words. The vocabulary learning problems of students with an SpLD are caused by their reduced phonological awareness and the smaller capacity of their phonological short-term memory, which impedes encoding verbal information in long-term memory. Students’ difficulties in this area of language learning are also apparent because learning a word involves memorizing a number of different types of information: the meaning, pronunciation and spelling of the word as well the syntactic, morphological, idiomatic and pragmatic information associated with it (Aitchison, 1987). Therefore, in order to facilitate the acquisition of L2 words, it is important to teach only a few new vocabulary items in a lesson (a maximum of six to eight new words) and to practise the words extensively. Students with an SpLD usually find it difficult to acquire new words implicitly from reading and listening to texts, accordingly, it is suggested that vocabulary teaching should mainly be explicit. Frequent revision of vocabulary items is also necessary in order to help learners to store new L2 words in long-term memory. New vocabulary taught in one session needs to be revised repeatedly on at least three to four consecutive occasions,
and a periodic review of recently learnt words at least fortnightly is also useful. It is recommended that similar sounding words and words that have very similar meanings should not be taught within a single lesson, otherwise students might easily mix them up. Students with an SpLD should not be overloaded with all the different information concerning a particular word in one lesson. In the case of languages in which the spelling of the word cannot always be deduced from pronunciation, it is helpful if students first learn the phonological form and the most frequent meaning of the word, and further information about the word (spelling, less common meaning, morphological and syntactic characteristics) is only taught once the form-meaning mapping is successfully made by the learners. Table 7.2 summarizes the basic principles in teaching vocabulary to students with an SpLD. Appendix 2 contains a description of two lesson plans demonstrating how vocabulary can be taught to learners with an SpLD.

Multi-sensory methods involving the auditory, visual and kinaesthetic modalities are particularly helpful both in the teaching of new words and in practice tasks. In presenting new vocabulary, it is recommended that the teacher repeats the words orally parallel to using either visual or kinaesthetic channels to demonstrate the meaning of words. Common kinaesthetic/tactile vocabulary learning activities are miming (Robinson-Tait, 2003; Schneider & Crombie 2003), tracing words on paper, on a desk, or in the air (Nijakowska, 2010). As for techniques stimulating the visual channels, the use of flashcards (Schneider & Crombie, 2003), and the preparation of drawings next to words in the vocabulary list (Robinson-Tait, 2003) can also facilitate the memorization of words. Mindmaps might also help students with an SpLD to remember and review L2 vocabulary (Nijakowska, 2010). Just like other language learners, students with an SpLD also learn vocabulary better if words are presented in a context and not in isolation because this aids anchoring words to the mental image of the situation in which they were encountered. Interactive computer games (e.g. http://eslbears.homestead.com/contact_info.html; http://iteslj.org/v/ei/) and games on portable electronic devices such as mobile phones and Nintendos are also excellent and motivating ways to practise vocabulary.

Students with an SpLD need to use efficient learning strategies in order to successfully encode words in long-term memory and to be able to retrieve them with ease. Mnemonic devices that might facilitate vocabulary acquisition are visual illustrations, sound and letter clues that help the recall of pronunciation and spelling, acronyms, and stories containing

**Table 7.2 Basic principles of teaching vocabulary to students with an SpLD**

- Limited amount of new vocabulary in a lesson
- Explicit teaching
- Extensive practice
- Multi-sensory presentation and practice techniques
- Frequent revision
- Separate the teaching of similar sounding words and words with a similar meaning
- Teach sound-meaning correspondence first
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words with difficult spellings. Other learning strategies include the use of keywords, which are words that belong to the learner’s active vocabulary either in their L1 or in L2, and which, if a new word is mentally linked to them, can assist the recall of pronunciation, spelling and/or morphology (Schneider & Crombie, 2003).

Language learners with an SpLD can also be helped in keeping a systematic record of words by using vocabulary notebooks, word cards or computer programs (e.g. http://quizlet.com). It is important that teachers routinely check these records in order to avoid incorrectly spelt words or vocabulary with inaccurate meaning being memorized by the learners. Students should also be encouraged to review words regularly outside the classroom. Ideally, revision of L2 vocabulary should form part of the daily routine of learners with SpLD, and they are advised to spend ten to fifteen minutes on practising words every day. A low-tech strategy, which is very effective, is the use of small vocabulary cards that the student can carry in a pocket, to review new words frequently in quiet moments of the day, such as on the bus, or when waiting in a queue.

**Teaching grammar**

The teaching of grammar to language learners with an SpLD is most effective if it is done explicitly. Although students might be able to deduce regularities of language from the input, it is important that they also receive clear and concise explanations on grammatical rules (Schneider & Crombie, 2003). It is helpful if grammar is presented in context and structures are related to their communicative functions. The use of complicated terminology is, however, to be avoided as students with an SpLD often struggle with grasping abstract linguistic constructs such as verbs, nouns or adjectives. The teaching of grammar also needs to proceed in small steps from simple to complex structures, and should build on learners’ existing knowledge. New grammatical structures should not be introduced until previously taught ones are sufficiently automatized.

Multi-sensory techniques can also be applied in the teaching of grammatical structures. The colour-coding of words or phrases that have different grammatical functions helps students understand grammatical concepts without using linguistic terminology. For example, we can decide to use red for the subject of the sentence, blue for the predicate and green for the object (e.g. The boyboughta book). If this kind of colour-coding is consistently followed, students will soon learn that words in red express the agents of actions, blue stands for the action itself, and green represents the object of the action. Additionally, large coloured Lego blocks and Cuisenaire rods can be used to illustrate word order (Schneider & Evers, 2009), and assigning students phrases and asking them to form a line in the appropriate order can also help the understanding of grammatical structures (see the lesson plan in Appendix 4). Interactive whiteboard activities, such as tasks in which students have to order words to form sentences, are also enjoyable and useful means of teaching and practising grammar.

Once students seem to have understood the presented grammatical structure, several practice sessions moving from controlled to free practice are needed. As already mentioned above, drills using a variety of formats can greatly assist in learning sentence
frames and in the automatization of linguistic structures. It is recommended that controlled practice should first be done orally and not in writing in order to avoid students’ attention being divided between the grammatical structure to be practised and reading and writing. Controlled written practice might first involve tasks that use short sentences and do not require extensive writing (e.g. matching, ordering or gap filling tasks). Tasks in which students have to choose the correct alternative from among a number of options might confuse learners and might potentially lead to the memorization of incorrect options, and hence should be avoided (Schneider & Crombie, 2003). A number of grammar games are freely available on the internet, but many of them use multiple choice option tasks, which makes them less attractive to students with an SpLD (but as an exception see the activities on http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/grammar-exercises). In free practice tasks such as oral communicative tasks or short pieces of writing, if the focus of the activity is on a given grammatical structure, students’ attention should not be overloaded with the expression of complex content, otherwise learners cannot heed grammatical accuracy. Therefore, it is helpful if students first have the chance to plan what they will say or write about, or if they are provided with samples of utterances that they can use in these communicative activities. Appendix 4 shows a sample grammar lesson for beginners.

**Teaching reading**

As mentioned in Chapter 4, reading consists of two important phases: (1) lower order decoding processes, which involve recognizing letter-sound correspondences and words as well as processing morphological and syntactic structures, and (2) higher-order processing, in the course of which readers understand and evaluate the information conveyed by the text. In Chapter 4, we also discussed that the reading difficulties of students with an SpLD mainly derive from problems in lower-order decoding processes. Higher-order processes, however, build on the efficient functioning of lower-order decoding processes; subsequently, students with an SpLD may also demonstrate global comprehension difficulties. As reading in L2 might prove particularly challenging for language learners with an SpLD, it is suggested that, if the teaching context and the requirements of the curriculum allow for it, students with an SpLD should only start reading texts above the sentence level after a longer oral language teaching phase. This helps learners to gain confidence in language learning and can serve as a foundation before reading is introduced. It is also recommended that an intensive development of L2 word reading skills precedes the teaching of text-level reading, and L2 word reading should also be practised regularly even after students start reading longer texts. Frequent and consistent practice on word recognition promotes the development of word decoding skills, which is essential for successful reading.

When selecting reading texts for students with an SpLD, several considerations might need to be taken into account. First of all, the length of the text should be increased gradually in the teaching process, starting with short paragraphs. Even if students have reached higher level proficiency, longer texts might be challenging and demotivating for students with an SpLD; hence it is useful to break longer texts up into smaller sections.
and work with them in several phases of the lesson. Second, texts should be motivating to read and should arouse the interest of the learners. Creating a need for reading the text and awakening learners’ curiosity in the information conveyed is crucial, otherwise students might be reluctant to engage in the potentially demanding activity of reading. The choice of text should also take into account the social and cultural context in which the language is learnt. Third, it is of great importance that the level of difficulty of the reading text is commensurate with the learners’ level of proficiency. Texts which are far beyond the level of the learners, even if the task is to gain a global understanding, might be discouraging for learners with a SpLD. Due to the vocabulary learning difficulties of students with an SpLD and the fact that they find it challenging to guess the meaning of unknown words from context, it is suggested that the text should not contain a high number of unfamiliar words. Similarly, the text should be carefully checked for grammatical structures that are new to the students as too many unfamiliar syntactic and morphological constructions can also hinder understanding. Finally, as mentioned in Chapter 6, the layout, format and presentation of the text needs to be adjusted to the needs of students with an SpLD. Well-selected texts available on the Internet easily meet the criteria of accessibility described above because digital texts are usually short, are accompanied with pictures and often with an audio content and allow students to select the font and the size of the letters.

Although every language learner seems to benefit from pre-reading activities, their use is particularly helpful for students with an SpLD. In order to give students with an SpLD a sense of accomplishment and provide them with successful reading experiences, it is vital that they get sufficient support before they start reading. First of all, it is greatly beneficial if students’ background knowledge concerning the theme of the text is activated before reading as this helps them build expectations as to what the text will be about. This can be done in the form of a discussion task, in which the students are given the topic of the text and share with the teacher or with each other in a group what they already know about the topic. Alternatively, brief quizzes on the theme of the reading might also be a useful and enjoyable means of stimulating expectations about the reading material. Giving learners a purpose for reading by asking them to find specific information in the text might also create motivation to read and can guide learners’ attention while reading. Finally, the pre-teaching of key vocabulary items that might be unfamiliar to the students can help learners focus on the information content of the text and aid global text comprehension. In addition, this might reduce the potential anxiety that students with an SpLD might experience when they encounter an unknown word while reading. Alternatively, the unknown words can be highlighted and colour-coded in the text and glosses on the meaning of the words can be given. It is, however, advised to take the vocabulary learning difficulties of the students into consideration and not to pre-teach more than six to eight words. Students will also benefit from the pre-teaching of unfamiliar grammatical structures.

As already mentioned in Chapter 6, students with an SpLD should not be asked to read aloud and be expected to understand what they read at the same time, as this is particularly challenging for them and might potentially be humiliating in a class where the other students do not have reading difficulties. It is advised that the actual activity of
reading for students with an SpLD should be short but focussed, and each reading phase should be followed by a discussion of what students have understood and learnt from the text. If students have great difficulties in reading, the teacher can first read out the text to the students. As a next step (or as a first one), students can be asked to read in order to understand the main informational content of the text, and on second reading students might look for specific pieces of information. The comprehension of the text can be checked by using questions that require short answers or with the help of tables, diagrams and flowcharts. Multiple-choice tasks with a high number of possible options might be confusing for the students, and gap-fill tasks that require extensive additional reading might also place an additional strain on them. A number of multi-sensory tasks can also be applied in the teaching of reading. Students can be asked to prepare illustrations for the reading or act out the story using not only words but also bodily movement. After students are familiar with the content of the text, students can work on the detailed understanding of specific sentences, words and longer phrasal constructions.

Reading texts can be exploited in a variety of ways to practise speaking and vocabulary and to provide opportunities for the meaningful use of language. Students can be asked to do a role-play or discussion activity based on the reading or to produce a short piece of writing such as writing an alternative ending, composing a letter and so on. If students have difficulties in L2 writing, writing activities can be replaced by oral tasks. Vocabulary learning activities based on words that occurred in the reading also help learners memorize words in context. Finally, it is important to mention that students with an SpLD benefit greatly from the explicit teaching of reading strategies such as using prediction, looking for key pieces of information and identifying the logic of the text and guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words and linguistic constructions. The use of the latter strategy, however, might be challenging because students with an SpLD tend to experience difficulties in establishing meaning using contextual and morphological clues.

To summarize the most important elements of teaching reading to students with an SpLD, we can revisit Table 7.1 for an overview of MSL teaching principles. The reading programme for students with an SpLD needs to be carefully structured and should build up reading skills gradually and cumulatively. Students benefit from explicit explanations of unfamiliar words and syntactic structures both in the pre-reading and the post-reading phases. Although reading practice is valuable, the importance of L2 reading in the given educational context needs to be considered, and if possible the development of oral skills including speaking and listening should be in the foreground. Multi-sensory elements in teaching reading can involve the use of drawing and acting tasks in checking comprehension. Furthermore, learners can be assisted in overcoming comprehension problems through the use of reading strategies. A sample reading lesson is given in Appendix 5.

Teaching listening

The teaching of listening shares a great number of similarities with teaching reading, but there are also a few differences in the teaching techniques that are helpful for addressing the difficulties students with an SpLD experience in listening to L2 texts. Generally,
students with an SpLD tend to find listening less challenging and anxiety-provoking than reading. Nevertheless, both the listening texts and the types of tasks used in teaching listening need to be adapted to these students’ needs.

Most importantly, students with an SpLD often have difficulties with the auditory discrimination of similar sounds, which are even further aggravated in another language that might have sound distinctions that do not exist in the learners’ L1. Hence texts in which students have to concentrate on distinguishing similar sounding words are particularly difficult for these learners. If the aim of the listening task is to achieve global comprehension of a listening text, it is helpful if the text contains only a low number of words that can be potentially confused with a similar sounding word. Additionally, students with an SpLD often find it problematic to concentrate on a stream of oral language for a long time and to keep a large amount of auditory information in working memory; consequently, just as with reading texts, listening input should also consist of short stretches of talk. Accompanying visual input (e.g. watching short film extracts, broadcasts and webcasts) can help students sustain their attention and might provide visual support in understanding the content of the text. It is also suggested that texts gradually increasing in speed, length and in clarity of articulation are used in the teaching process. Similar to the considerations in selecting appropriate reading materials, listening texts should also be interesting, culturally and contextually relevant and should not be far beyond the level of the students’ language competence in terms of the vocabulary and grammatical structures occurring in the input.

Using similar tasks to those outlined in the introduction of reading texts is helpful in activating learners’ background knowledge and creating expectations before listening. Just as in the case of reading, it greatly aids comprehension if the learners’ attention is guided in the listening process, which can be achieved by giving students a purpose for listening. Additionally, the pre-teaching of vocabulary, but this time with great emphasis on the pronunciation of the words, assists learners in decoding words in the listening text and thereby promotes understanding.

Students with an SpLD generally tend to find it difficult to listen and read and listen and write at the same time. Therefore, it is advised that when listening to a text for the first time, learners should just listen and focus on understanding the main points, and they should not be asked to do a task parallel to listening. After the first listening, the teacher can check how much of the key information students have comprehended, and if comprehension was incomplete, further questions that can guide learners’ attention during second listening can be asked. Once students seem to have a good general understanding of the text, they can be presented with listening tasks such as filling in missing pieces of information in a table or flowchart or giving brief answers to questions. It is important that students should have enough time to read the task input before listening and that the teacher checks that they understand the written task instructions. It is suggested that students with an SpLD should not be asked to record their answers to the listening tasks while listening because they find it difficult to divide their attention between listening and writing. Similarly, notetaking as a task might prove to be particularly challenging for them. If the text is short, students can do the tasks after
listening; alternatively, the listening process can be interrupted at regular intervals to allow learners to make a note of their answers. If students have great difficulties in L2 reading or writing, tasks that involve reading and/or writing can be substituted with oral comprehension check questions. Multi-sensory teaching elements can also be introduced in the teaching of listening by devising tasks that involve movement, such as carrying out instructions presented in the listening text or preparing drawings that illustrate the content of the listening material. On a final listening, students can be asked to focus on those parts of the listening text that they had difficulties comprehending, which can be followed by a discussion of these difficulties and on clarifying potential misunderstandings of the text.

Listening texts serve as a good source for further language development as they provide ample vocabulary input and might help learners in acquiring formulaic expressions, and in associating grammatical structures with communicative functions. Post-listening communicative activities also foster the development of speaking and writing skills. Additionally, students with an SpLD benefit from training in listening strategies such as predicting what the text will be about and what will follow within the text, focussing on the main idea and making informed guesses.

The principles of multi-sensory instruction can also be applied in teaching listening. In reviewing the above description of teaching techniques and strategies, we can observe that carefully selected listening texts can ensure that the development of students’ speech comprehension abilities progresses cumulatively and in a structured manner. Linguistic constructions necessary for the comprehension of the listening text are taught explicitly in the pre-listening phase, and in the post-listening stage, students can receive additional explanation on structures and words they encountered in the listening texts. It is important that students with an SpLD are provided with ample opportunities to hear L2 speech as these learners are usually not exposed to sufficient input through L2 reading. Multi-sensory listening tasks involving responding to the listening material with movements also make listening for students more enjoyable and help them acquire words and expressions.

**Teaching speaking**

Speaking is a component of language proficiency in which students with an SpLD might excel and experience fewer difficulties compared to the acquisition of other skills. In foreign language contexts where the curricular and assessment demands and the general language learning needs do not require that students achieve a high level of competence in skills involving reading and writing, oral language skills can play a central role in the language teaching process. Thus, a large number of instructional programmes planned specifically for students with an SpLD almost exclusively focus on oral communication (see e.g. Kormos et al., 2010b). In these programmes, commonly used methods in the teaching of speaking are applied with adjustments that take into consideration the difficulties of students with an SpLD. The major challenges these students face in speaking in L2 involve the quick and efficient retrieval of words, remembering the
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pronunciation of words, articulating the words correctly, consciously constructing sentences from word constituents and producing longer coherent oral monologues. Some students with an SpLD, especially those with Asperger’s syndrome, might also find it difficult to apply appropriate social conventions of language use in the L2. Further obstacles to speaking in L2 can be that students with an SpLD might lack self-confidence and exhibit anxiety in communicating in the target language, especially in front of a large group (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008).

In order to build up the confidence of students with an SpLD in their spoken language abilities, it is advised that oral communication activities are introduced from the first stages of language learning. Students need to be encouraged to produce one or two-word utterances such as responding to simple personal questions in communicative situations even at the beginning level. Most online dictionaries not only give the meaning of L2 words but also the pronunciation of the words, which helps students memorize the phonological form of the words and improves their pronunciation. Interactive activities that improve students’ pronunciation and intonation skills at the word and sentence level are also available on the Internet (e.g. http://www.englishcentral.com). Learners can then gradually progress from producing simple to complex sentences and from being able to respond in one and two sentence turns to constructing longer pieces of oral discourse. This ensures that the principle of cumulative progress of MSL instruction is also observed in teaching speaking. Due to the fact that students with an SpLD have difficulties in encoding L2 words and expressions in long-term memory, they need ample and varied practice opportunities in which they can meaningfully use phrases and short sentences for oral communication. Furthermore, multi-sensory speaking tasks in which speech is accompanied by movement are particularly useful means of helping learners memorize communicative phrases and expressions.

It is also conducive to the development of the speaking skills of learners with an SpLD if they receive explicit explanation on how to carry out communicative tasks. Hence, it is useful if students are not only presented with a model of the task, for example by listening to native speakers performing the task, but also receive a detailed explanation of how the task is structured, and how the various communicative functions in the interaction can be realized using the L2. As students with an SpLD find it difficult to divide their attention between communicative content and linguistic form, it is beneficial to review the vocabulary and syntactic structures necessary for the successful fulfilment of the task. Additionally, task frames, which contain phrases and constructions that students can manipulate to express their intended message can be provided. Students with an SpLD also need extended planning time that allows them to formulate the content of their utterance before speaking.

After the modelling and planning stage, it is advised that students are given the opportunity to rehearse the task in small groups without having to worry about making errors, and without the pressure of having to perform in front of a large audience. This allows them to repeat and improve their performance and might alleviate the anxiety students with an SpLD frequently experience in L2 communication. The teacher can observe and give individual feedback to the students while they are working in pairs or in
small groups. Finally, selected groups or pairs can carry out the task in front of the whole class, but this stage might be omitted with students who are particularly anxious in these contexts. Modern technology, such as the use of PowerPoint presentations, which provides textual support and helps learners to organize and remember their talk, and asking students to record themselves or each other with a videocamera (nowadays routinely built into mobile phones) and preparing podcasts and webcasts, which allow for presenting rehearsed and planned performance, might also be motivating and enjoyable means of practising speaking. Appendix 6 contains an example task frame that can be used for teaching a specific speech function.

**Teaching writing**

Producing longer texts in writing might be particularly challenging for learners with an SpLD. Therefore, in a large number of language learning contexts these learners are often exempted from the writing requirements set by the curricula. Exemptions from text-level writing might be viable if learners are likely to use the L2 for mainly oral communication outside the classroom. There are, however, situations in which students with an SpLD are also expected to display sufficient levels of writing competence. In these cases, the teaching of writing needs to take into account both the difficulties that students face concerning the lower level aspects of writing such as handwriting and spelling, as well as the higher level, organizational aspects of composing.

Writing activities should be introduced gradually into the teaching process starting from very short sentence level tasks and tasks in which students only need to fill in selected pieces of missing information. If students demonstrate serious problems with handwriting and spelling individual words, they cannot be expected to be able to produce longer stretches of written discourse without sufficient help and scaffolding. Due to the fact that writing might be especially difficult for learners with an SpLD, it is imperative that writing tasks should be motivating and interesting and should provide a feeling of success and sense of accomplishment. The use of modern communication technology such as writing emails, chatting, and text messaging might also be recommended, and because it does not require handwriting, this might substitute or complement paper and pen writing activities.

Activities that precede the actual writing task and assist learners in planning the content and the linguistic aspects of their text are important in helping learners to overcome their writing difficulties. Without appropriate preparation for the writing activity, the composing attempts of students with an SpLD might be doomed to failure and students’ motivation to express their thoughts in writing might decrease substantially. For this reason, the use of brainstorming activities and the preparation of an outline for the text are strongly recommended (interactive mindmapping and brainstorming tools are also available on the Internet e.g. http://bubbl.us/). In addition, providing learners with a model text, writing frame or template such as the letter frame in the grammar activity presented in Appendix 5 might be useful. Furthermore, learners with an SpLD might also benefit from colour-coding in these models and templates because it gives them guidance.
on constructing sentences. Students might also find it easier to organize their ideas through the use and manipulation of shapes or colours that indicate different parts of the paragraph (e.g. topic sentence – red, supporting example – green) or the essay (e.g. introduction – rectangle, body – circle, conclusion – triangle) (Schneider & Evers, 2009).

The review of vocabulary and syntactic structures necessary for the writing task also assists learners with an SpLD by activating the necessary linguistic items and constructions in their memory and helping them to retrieve these while writing. Setting the linguistic focus of the activity such as telling the learners to concentrate on capitalization, the use of connectives, punctuation and so on might also promote linguistic accuracy. It is recommended, however, that only one such focus for the writing task should be established in order to avoid excessive attentional demands on the learners.

Writing activities involving the use of modern technology such as writing blogs and sharing and co-editing documents online might also be effective means for enhancing the writing and reading skills of students with an SpLD. These new online writing activities are motivating because they provide a means for displaying students’ work to the class and potentially to a wider public, and thus create a real audience for the students’ writing. As they can be easily edited and commented on, students who have handwriting difficulties might find these tasks more manageable than traditional writing activities.

If possible, writing tasks should be short, or if the construction of longer texts is required, it is advised to introduce brief intervals in the writing process (e.g. students can be asked to prepare illustrations for their writing in these breaks). Students with an SpLD might require support from the teacher while writing, and other assistive devices such as laptops, electronic dictionaries and spellcheckers might also aid learners in composing their text. Although it is beneficial to teach learners how to self-edit and self-correct their work, for example with the use of checklists or guidelines, learners with an SpLD might find it difficult to find their own spelling and grammatical mistakes. They might, however, be able to detect organizational problems in their text. Similarly, students with an SpLD might not benefit from corrections in their work that only indicate spelling and grammar mistakes without providing them with the accurate form. Corrections in written work should not be overwhelming, as seeing a large number of errors underlined might be very discouraging for the students. Instead, it is advised to focus on one aspect in writing such as organization when giving feedback and ignore certain other aspects such as spelling. Alternatively, photocopies of the students’ work can be made, and feedback can be provided in separate sessions using one copy of the text at a time with a specific focus.

This chapter presented general methods as well as particular techniques in teaching the four skills and grammar and vocabulary to students with an SpLD. We showed how the principles of multi-sensory instruction can be put into practice in different aspects of language teaching and how language learners with an SpLD might be helped in the successful acquisition of another language. The next chapter will focus on how the achievement and progress of these learners can be assessed in a fair and reliable manner.
Summary of key points

- The use of multi-sensory techniques such as colour-coding, drawings, accompanying movements and acting, aids the memorization of new linguistic material and makes practice tasks enjoyable and varied.
- Students with an SpLD benefit from explicit explanation in every aspect of L2 learning including grammar, pronunciation, spelling as well as the creation and understanding of written and spoken texts.
- Frequent and varied practice and periodic revision activities help learners with an SpLD anchor L2 items and constructions in long-term memory.
- Drills, sentence and task frames and models help the automatization of L2 grammatical constructions and are conducive to the development of speaking and writing skills.
- Slow progress in small cumulative steps provides learners with an SpLD with sufficient practice opportunities and gives them a sense of accomplishment. The careful structuring and pacing of production (speaking and writing) and perception (reading and listening) tasks is of great importance.
- Pre-teaching activities aid students with an SpLD to cope with listening and reading texts and with the difficulties they might experience in producing oral and written discourse.
- Modelling and practising the application of learning strategies helps learners to discover the techniques that they can efficiently apply to overcome their L2 learning difficulties.

Activities

1. Design a 45 minute lesson for students with an SpLD teaching:
   a) a group of L2 words
   b) a specific grammatical construction
   c) a spelling rule
   d) a selected communicative function (e.g. requests, asking for information etc.)
2. Select a reading/listening text that might be appropriate for learners with an SpLD and discuss what considerations you took into account in the selection process and how the text might need to be adjusted to the potential difficulties students with an SpLD might experience in handling the text.
3. Design a 45-minute lesson based on the selected reading/listening text for learners with an SpLD.
4. Select one website or a web-based application that contains language learning tasks or games that students with an SpLD would find particularly useful. Prepare a brief presentation on the website or application in which you explain what aspects of language students can practise and how the website or application is suitable for students with an SpLD.
Further reading

