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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ASSISTING STUDENTS WITH LANGUAGE LEARNING DIFFICULTIES AT TERTIARY LEVEL

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### ABSTRACT

Students throughout India, particularly in Tamil Nadu, face many problems in the acquisition of English as a second language even at college level. The topic discusses the major difficulties faced by students in colleges in learning English as a Part II language as well as a major subject. Most of the students who come from Tamil medium schools had learned all their subjects through their mother tongue face difficulty in college as they have to learn all the subjects in English. In many of the Government schools, English is not given its due importance when compared to other major subjects. Most of the students who hail from these schools are found to be below average in their learning ability. Hence, there is a growing need to find necessary solutions to make the students proficient in English. The article suggests some possible methods by which language proficiency can be achieved in slow, average as well as below average students in college.

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## INTRODUCTION

In a multilingual country like India, students face many problems in the acquisition of English as a second language even at college level. The paper discusses the problems faced by the students in learning English. Most of the students completed their schooling through mother tongue. Many of these students are below average in their learning ability especially in English. Hence it is has become necessary to find solutions to make the students proficient in English. Language proficiency can be attained by average as well as below average and slow learners in the college by following certain techniques that are discussed in this article.

### *Problems in second language acquisition*

Students with moderate to severe difficulties in learning a language may find the completion of language requirement in college seemingly impossible. Often these students are classified as having dyslexia or language learning disabilities; and such students struggle considerably to meet the language requirement.

Students who face most difficulty are those who have experienced moderate to severe reading and spelling difficulties in their native language in their early schooling and now are required to study another language that is English. Many of these students are categorized as “at-risk” learners.

### *Questions Focussed*

The following are some of the important questions put forth for learners of English:

- Who may have difficulty in fulfilling English requirement at college?
- What do research findings indicate about English study and “at-risk” students?
- Which instructional methods are beneficial for at-risk English learners?
- What additional adaptations do the students with moderate to severe language learning difficulties need?
- What are the challenges that exist for students with moderate to severe English learning difficulties?
- What challenges do exist for teachers of students with moderate to severe English learning difficulties?
- What do experts recommend for the study of English?

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### ***Difficulty of the Students***

Students who have difficulties in one or more of the language systems like reading, writing, listening, speaking, may experience problems while learning English in college. The degree of difficulty a student is likely to experience depends on the nature and severity of his/her language problems in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Students who have moderate to severe difficulties in most or all of these language systems in their native language experience most hardships in learning English, particularly in language classrooms that emphasize an oral communicative approach.

Students who have difficulties in learning English are sometimes referred to as “at-risk” because of their struggles in the regular English classroom. Some of these students are classified as having language learning disabilities or dyslexia. Such students often do not understand the question asked in the examination. They read, memorize, but forget within a week. This again poses a problem for below average to at-risk students. Besides, students from rural background are perplexed to learn English as they consider that mastering the language a herculean task.

### ***Research Findings***

It suggests that at-risk students who have difficulty in learning a language, generally experience overt or subtle problems with the oral and written aspects of their native language. Many of these students manage to pass in the examination due to the grace marks. On the other hand, some keen students develop skills on their own with the support of the teachers.

The problems in acquiring a second language can occur in any combination and at different levels of severity in three areas of language. They are phonological / orthographic area, syntactic area and semantic area. For example, students who face difficulties with the phonological/ orthographic component of English in elementary school have difficulty learning and remembering the sounds of the consonants and distinguishing the different sounds of vowels. Later, as they study English in college, they have difficulty in learning to pronounce, read, and spell words.

Further, these students experienced problems in subject-verb agreement (concord errors), use of plurals, possessives, and parts of speech in English. In their writing, they did not use complete sentences and most of the time use incorrect verb tenses and they struggle to conjugate verbs. They also have difficulty matching the correct masculine or feminine pronoun with a noun (noun-pronoun agreement) or placing the adjective in proper order in a spoken or written sentence.

Students with weak grammar and semantics in the native language have trouble in comprehending the meaning of what was said to them in the native language when listening to others speech or problems in understanding what they read. Later, in the study of English, they may perform well in the first semester as the sentence structures are relatively simple and vocabulary concentrates on concrete, life-related topics. Whereas in advanced level courses, the amount of complexity

of listening, speaking, reading, and writing tasks is high and it is quite natural that the students' difficulties increase as language complexity increases.

It also shows that the primary difficulty for “at-risk” learners most likely originate in the phonological/ orthographic, and sometimes syntactic areas of language rather than the semantic area. Their difficulties often become apparent in the first semester of English course. Students with low levels of sound-symbol and grammatical skills tend to have problems with most aspects of English learning — listening, speaking, pronunciation, reading, and writing. According to Perin (2004), lack of reading motivation impedes upper elementary and secondary school students' willingness to improve critical reading skills and strategies to be successful in school. Struggling readers often show a negative attitude towards reading tasks and manifest low motivation to read. Although the importance of motivation is clear, there is limited research on reading motivation of struggling adolescents with disabilities.[5]

The differences between one's native language and the language of study also pose problems for the students with language learning difficulties. Another dimension on which languages differ is in their morphological complexity. Some languages allow numerous additions of words or parts of words and word endings that change depending upon their place in the sentence. For languages with complex morphologies students have to break down long words of many syllables into their parts to determine the meaning, or they have to add one or more "affixes" or word parts to the word to produce grammatically and semantically meaningful information. Other dimensions on which languages differ are grammatical rules and special markings on letters. The arrangement of word order in sentences, agreement between subject and verb, and linking clauses are examples of grammatical rules.

Some languages have a great variety of diacritical markers which denotes a particular pronunciation, an accent, or even grammatical information necessary for obtaining meaning. In short, there is no “simple” English, as all have “dimensions” that could pose difficulty for the students with language processing difficulties.

### ***Beneficial Methods For At-Risk Learners***

Students can benefit from multi-sensory structured, explicit language instruction. A multi-sensory structured language (MSL) approach in the English is similar to a set of instructions in English.

### ***Multisensory***

In this approach, language is taught using multiple input/output strategies — visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic. Use of several learning channels simultaneously (listening, speaking, reading, writing, and mnemonic devices for memory) helps the learners to acquire proficiency in the language. Research findings also suggest that hearing, seeing, and saying a word (concept) simultaneously enhances memory.

Ganschow and Snider (2006) suggest the following techniques to teach vocabulary. According to them, when teaching new sounds and symbols, teach only one or two words at a time. In teaching a new or unfamiliar sound, ask the student to imitate the teacher's modeling of mouth movements and to trace the letter pattern while saying and spelling the sound. [3] Using appropriate visual aids like picture clues for words, hand and mouth movements to illustrate a sound, or color coded endings to illustrate gender and subject / verb agreement also help the learners to master the language.

### ***Repetitive***

Provide opportunities for the student to practice and review a concept frequently to assure automaticity. Examples include practicing forming letters correctly, spelling non-phonetic words and reviewing spelling patterns. Giving the learners guided pair work activities to practice and to reinforce a concept, pairing a strong student with a weaker student, providing ample time to discover, practice, and use meaningful mnemonic devices such as songs with specified grammatical sentence structures or special rhythms; reinforce concepts by using acronyms, drawings, and gestures.

### ***Structured***

Teaching language concepts in a logical progression helps the student categorize concepts. Providing structured, explicit overviews of the material covered, which includes study guides of the day's activities, summary sheets, graphic representations, and semantic maps.

Direct and explicit teaching is necessary for grammatical, syntactic, and morphological patterns engaging all learning channels for maximum outcomes.

### ***Sequential***

Organizing language concepts from simple to complex, could be done using consonant+vowel+consonant patterns with three letters should be taught before using blends or digraphs for four- and five-letter words.

### ***Cumulative***

Directly teach the students the correlation between the sounds of the language and the letter(s). Progress from most frequently to least frequently appearing letter-sound patterns so that students can experience success as quickly as possible.

### ***Alphabetic/ phonetic***

Use of inductive method to teach the student the sounds of the language and the letter(s) those sounds/sound sequences represent.

### ***Metacognitive***

Language teachers should help the students to think about the language concept to be learned and should allow the student to explain the concept in his/her own words. This process helps

the student to understand why certain rules or procedures occur in the language of study. Knowing 'why' assists the student in learning to develop self-confidence in identifying and correcting his/her own errors.

### ***Analytic/ synthetic***

In this approach teacher should show the student how to break apart words. Especially words with more than one syllable and then show him/her how to put the parts back together again. This approach helps the students to self-correct and improve their decoding and spelling. Often, the MSL principles are combined. The following example includes structured, sequential and metacognitive MSL principles.

- Conduct a task analysis of the concept to be learned.
- Break the concept or skill into small working steps and model for the student how to think through a concept.
- Repeat this procedure as often as necessary.

Perin opines that a good deal of the learning assistance at the study sites was focussed on helping students complete course assignments. [5]

### ***Additional Adaptations***

Students with moderate to severe language learning difficulties need more intensive instruction than that provided in the general English classroom. This instruction includes one-to-one or small group tutoring, extra time coaching apart from the class hours, etc. ELT experts suggest that allotting extra time for practice to master a language concept along with reduced course load can enable the student to focus on the language. [1]

### ***Existing challenges for Students***

A major challenge for students might be finding the appropriate learning environment for their particular needs. Sometimes students need extra time to learn a language concept, a slower pace of instruction, and special attention to specific aspects of the language, such as the sounds and special symbols of the language and grammatical rules. Students need extra tutoring and also require a distraction-free learning environment and explicit guidance about language concepts.

Another challenge is the need for students to recognize and acknowledge their own unique learning difficulties. This may necessitate putting in considerable extra effort to complete the English requirement successfully, asking for support from various resources (teachers, tutors, peers), and frequently requesting the additional explanations they may need to understand a concept.

### ***Challenges faced by teachers***

Traditionally, English teacher education has prepared teachers for the ideal learner who can thrive in whole-language instructional settings without explicit attention to the underlying linguistic patterns of English.

By and large, students are expected to become proficient in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and pronunciation through exposure and practice. Teachers, therefore, may need training in methods of addressing the special needs of some students in their classrooms. They require additional time and resources to establish a classroom appropriate for students with diverse needs and abilities. They may need to work together with students who have learning difficulties to determine what accommodations might be most beneficial for that student. Training package should be developed for in service teachers and conducting training sessions also assists the language teachers in helping the “at-risk” learners.

### **Expert Recommendations**

To date, there is evidence that students with language learning difficulties can succeed in their study of English, especially if they have appropriate instructional modifications. Research evidence suggests that at-risk students can experience success in classrooms that provide direct, explicit instruction on language structure and extra time to master the subject matter [6]. Some experts therefore encourage students to expose themselves to the study of a language of their choice early in their schooling, talk to their instructor about their language needs, and seek additional help as soon as it is needed. They recommend that students should recognize that the study of English may take extra effort on their part, but that it will provide them with an experience in linguistic and cultural diversity that is desirable today in our global society. In fact, by taking the time to incorporate these strategies into your teaching, you will help many more students become engaged, active participants. This includes not only students with LD, but other students as well. For example, all English language learners, even those without learning disabilities, will benefit from strategies that focus on making language clearer and more comprehensible [2].

### **CONCLUSION**

There are certain measures taken to improve the vocabulary and grammar knowledge of the students. Many students of English are supplied with “The Hindu” and are asked to read it carefully and try to find the meanings of difficult words using the dictionary.

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Students are also asked to look for the construction of the sentences and consult the grammar book when they are in doubt. Sometimes struggling students may need to take fewer courses or focus specifically on English study. It is helpful in this situation to provide letters of support from English instructors as well as documentation of effort. Under the right circumstances, then, the study of English can be a positive and culturally broadening experience.

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