

Successful Special Needs Students in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Introduction

Is this idea even possible? Can special education students really be successful in a foreign language classroom when they already struggle with their other subjects like math, science, social studies, and English? I say, yes! All students can be successful in the foreign language classroom if they have the desire and motivation to be and are given the chance to reach their own individual potential regardless of their personal or educational challenges. Yes, that is a bold statement; however, this article will review professional literature and provide data from my own students that support the idea that students can be more successful if their affective filter is lowered and their levels of motivation and self-efficacy are raised. Furthermore, students are able to recognize and respond to higher levels of expectations and to achieve a level of success equal to or greater than their non-special education counterparts.

The characteristics of the average learner in a Language-Other-Than-English (LOTE) classroom are changing.

In previous decades, only college-bound students studied foreign languages; however, today a rich array of students with a wide range of needs, ability levels, and expectations fills the modern classroom. This influx of learners, including mainstreamed special education students, can be attributed to some school districts requiring all students to complete advanced high school graduation degree plans, which include several years of study of a foreign language. (Bond, 2003, p. 11)

Educating students with special needs ranging from emotional and/or behavioral challenges to learning disabilities in the foreign language classroom is particularly challenging. The fact remains, however, that all students are entitled to a comprehensive and complete education with foreign language instruction included. The situation that exists regards the New York State LOTE requirement for high school graduation with a Regents diploma and the meeting of that requirement by students identified with special needs.

The New York State Education Department has stated under LOTE requirements that, “Public school students first entering grade nine in 1990 and thereafter shall have completed at

least two units of study in a language other than English at some time during grades kindergarten through nine” (SUNY-SED, 2005). The requirements can be met with students taking a foreign language course while in middle school. Students can take a foreign language while in seventh and eighth grades. When the students successfully complete the New York State Proficiency Exam in a foreign language, they are awarded their first unit of credit in LOTE that will go toward their high school Regents diploma. The New York State Department of Education has further stated, “Each student with a disability shall have access to the full range of programs and services to the extent that such programs and services are appropriate to the student’s special education needs” (SUNY-SED, 2005). Modifications to the instructional techniques and materials used by schools and educators should be addressed in order to provide the student with disabilities the opportunity to meet graduation requirements. The appropriateness of these modifications will be evaluated annually (or as deemed necessary) at the review of the student’s individualized education plan (IEP).

The classifications of disability identified in students include Learning Disabled (LD), Emotional Disturbances (ED), Behavioral Disturbances (BD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), Asperger’s Syndrome, Reactive Attachment Disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Disorder with Hyperactivity (ADHD), Bi-Polar Disorder, Conduct Disorder, and Color Vision Defect. All of these affect students and their learning styles and abilities to learn differently. While a student may be officially classified into only one of these categories, it is very common for that same student to also have several other different disabilities to varying degrees, providing further challenges throughout the school day.

Data collected for use in this article will be from my own students. These children are seventh and eighth graders at Benjamin Franklin Middle School in Kenmore, New York. All of my students are classified as special education students and are in self-contained classrooms. The students come to Spanish class separate from any other regular education students but combined (both seventh and eighth graders together) as they are for all other content in their self-contained classrooms. Self-contained classrooms at Benjamin Franklin Middle School are either considered 8:1:1 (eight students, one classroom teacher, and one classroom aide; usually ED/BD students) or 15:1:1 (fifteen students, one classroom teacher, and one classroom aide; usually LD students). They receive the same curriculum as any other regular education student and take the New York State Proficiency Exam at the end of their eighth grade year.

María Treviño (2005) recalls her first few years of teaching students with special needs in the LOTE classroom. In her article “Inclusion in the LOTE Classroom,” Treviño writes, “I remember receiving a list from the counselors of students who were considered ‘slow learners’ and being told that they needed more time to do their work. There was no special training for teachers and no meeting between all parties to discuss the students’ educational plans. Teachers would read the lists, make a notation to provide additional assistance, and move forward” (para. 1). Treviño goes on to point out in her article that “Teachers are trying to accommodate all students so that they can be successful yet somehow the training to meet the needs of ‘special needs’ students has not been available, especially for teachers of Languages Other Than English.” Because foreign language is part of the core curriculum in New York State, LOTE teachers deal with modifications (a change in content) and accommodations (a change in teaching strategy, environment, climate, etc.) on a daily basis in order to help all students become successful in learning a second language.

During the Treviño action research study, frustration became evident as these direct quotes from a survey illustrate (from para. 9):

“In order for the LOTE teacher to provide meaningful input into the IEP, the teacher needs special training in recognizing appropriate accommodations and modifications for different special needs.”

“I don’t know the difference between an accommodation and a modification.”

“Large class size hinders special help for any one student.”

“I often am at a loss; I don’t understand what is expected of me for these students.”

“But this is foreign language; if the student can’t perform, he/she shouldn’t be here.”

It is clear that some teachers are trying to do their jobs, but there needs to be support at the district level with curriculum and staff development and plenty of cooperation between the Special Education Department and the LOTE teachers (Treviño, 2005). The sad truth, however, is that some educators have given up on trying to help these students with special needs. They don’t know how to motivate their students. Teachers aren’t sure exactly how to adjust or modify the curriculum to best fit the needs of their students. Over time, special needs students are simply treated as “disabled” instead of “abled” students. Their talents are not tapped into, their potential is not enticed to emerge, and eventually expectations are lowered and learned helplessness is

fostered. These students need to be motivated to perform to the best of their own individual abilities in the LOTE classroom.

Motivation

Educators from pre-school teachers to college professors have been continually faced with the challenge of motivating their students. Teachers use various strategies to encourage their students to become actively engaged in their lessons, develop a sense of intrinsic motivation, and foster a sense of self-efficacy and positive self-concept. Research has consistently demonstrated that the motivational beliefs of students have a direct effect on their academic performance as well as the beliefs of the teachers of those students.

Efficacy beliefs influence how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave. Perceived self-efficacy contributes to cognitive development and functioning, and exerts its influence through four major processes. Students' beliefs in their efficacy to regulate their own learning and to master academic activities determine their aspirations, level of motivation, and academic accomplishments. Teachers' beliefs in their personal efficacy to motivate and promote learning affect the types of learning environments they create and the level of academic progress their students achieve (Bandura, 1993).

The following excerpts, from a "think aloud" study conducted with some of my own students in 2005, support Bandura's findings.

Teacher: "Do you feel that you are able to do the work that is given to you in class?"

Student 1: "Yeah, sometimes I don't want to, but I know I can do it."

Teacher: "Do you feel that you know what your teacher expects of you?"

Student 1: "Yeah."

Teacher: "How do you feel about Spanish?"

Student 1: "I feel confident that I can do Spanish now."

Teacher: "Why?"

Student 1: "You tell us that you believe in us and that you think we can do it. You don't let us say, 'I can't'."

Teacher: “When you give the right answer to a question, do you think about any strategies or ‘helpers’ we use in class to help you?”

Student 2: “Yes. What I do is like if I try one and it doesn’t work, I go on to something else until I figure it out—you keep telling us not to quit, so I keep trying.”

Teacher: “Why do you think that you will eventually get the right answer?”

Student 2: “Because you told me I can – you believe in me. And you said I’m not allowed to say ‘I can’t’ in your class. You always say, ‘Sancho, sí, se puede’ (Sancho, you can do it).”

Teacher: “Do you think that you are able to do the work that is given to you in Spanish or is it too hard?”

Student 3: “Sometimes the stuff is hard to read or whatever, but you say you give us hard stuff ‘cause you believe in us and we want to do it so we can feel good but to show you we can do it too.”

The second part of the “think aloud” study was a short questionnaire. Question number four read, “Do you feel that your teacher encourages you or makes you feel confident about learning Spanish?” The students (15 in total) reported unanimously that they feel that their teacher’s encouragement raises their level of confidence. It is evidenced by these interview segments and “think aloud” questions that students are able to recognize the level of expectations placed on them and what they need to do to meet or even exceed those expectations. Their responses showed high levels of self-efficacy and self-concept and were shown to be a direct result of a teacher’s encouragement and support. If it is students’ perception that their teacher, without exception, believes that they can accomplish any task they embark upon, they eventually believe the same of themselves. These data support the aforementioned literature that states that the lower the affective filter and the higher the level of self-efficacy, the more probable it is that a student classified with special needs of some kind can be successful in a second language classroom setting.

Expectations

Harry Wong (1998, p. 35) wrote, “Knowing what you can or cannot achieve is called expectation. An expectation is what you believe will or will not happen.” In his book, *The First Days of School*, he further states that there are two kinds of expectations: positive or high expectations and conversely, negative or low expectations. It should be noted that expectations differ from standards. Standards, in this case, are levels of academic achievement while expectation is the belief that students can achieve those standards. Teachers who exhibit positive and high expectations for their students will help them reach or exceed the set standards. Wong states (1998, p. 36), “A positive expectation is an optimistic belief that whomever you teach or whatever you do will result in success or achievement. If you expect to be successful, you are constantly alert and aware of opportunities to help you be successful.” Students tend to learn as little or as much as their teachers expect. Teachers who set and communicate high and positive expectations to all their students regardless of race, national origin, family situation, financial status, past educational accomplishments, learning disability, or behavioral challenge obtain greater academic performance from their students than do teachers who set low or negative expectations (U.S. Department of Education, 1986).

The North Carolina Public Schools State Board of Education, Department of Public Instruction, has developed strategies and methods that can be used by classroom teachers to exhibit high positive expectations toward students. The North Carolina Public Schools Student Accountability Standards Handbook (2005) states that these strategies are apparent when the teacher

1. creates a safe and risk-free environment that allows students to ask questions freely.
2. provides a classroom schedule that makes effective use of time.
3. arranges the room effectively to facilitate both group and individual learning.
4. develops routines for recognition of student academic success, display of student work, and periodic communication with parents or caregivers.

These strategies and methods echo some of those related to lowering the affective filter, promoting motivation, and increasing self-efficacy; all these elements need to work together effectively in order to most efficiently benefit the student, instructor, and learning community. Wong (1998) suggests that the level of expectation set for students stems directly from the

classroom teacher by writing, “You can accomplish anything with students if you set high expectations for behavior and performance by which you yourself abide” (Wong, 1998, p. 35).

Strategies

Active learning motivates students. Students learn by doing, making, writing, creating, etc. When children are challenged and engaged in learning, their natural curiosity flourishes. For students who may need more help getting motivated, teachers play a critical role in inspiring, encouraging, and stimulating their learning. A descriptive study conducted by Madden (1997) investigated what 126 elementary teachers did to motivate their students’ learning. Sixty-two percent of them reported that they employed personal goal setting. Personal goal setting was defined as the level of achievement that students established for themselves to reach. Goal-setting activities reported by these teachers include students setting their own goals (1) in an independent reading initiative where students fill out the number of hours they wish to read, (2) for how many words they hope to spell correctly on the weekly test, and (3) by being very specific (as in number of correct answers on a math test) rather than just saying, “I’ll do my best” (Madden, 1997).

The teachers reported various positive outcomes from using this strategy. For example, students were (1) willing to take risks to learn, (2) willing to take ownership of their individual programs, (3) having a say in what they learn as a motivating factor, and (4) promoting self-pride, self-efficacy, and higher levels of intrinsic motivation to name just a few. Some follow-up strategies were also mentioned that were used when students did not meet their goals. Examples include (1) reteaching the material using games or other fun activities, (2) reevaluating the initial goals and deciding whether setting new ones is an option, and (3) allowing more time to achieve the original goal. The use of individual goal setting accompanied by appropriate feedback and teacher support tend to be very effective approaches to motivating students to learn (Madden, 1997).

In an empirical study, motivation in the learning of a foreign language is addressed by Dörnyei & Csizér (1998), who conducted a survey aimed at obtaining classroom data on motivational strategies. The participants in this study were 200 teachers of English in Hungary, teaching in a variety of institutional contexts ranging from elementary schools to universities. Their “Ten Commandments for Motivating Language Learners” read as follows:

1. Set a personal example with your own behaviors.
2. Create a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere in the classroom.
3. Present the tasks properly.
4. Develop a good relationship with the learners.
5. Increase the learners' self-confidence.
6. Make the classes interesting.
7. Promote learner autonomy.
8. Personalize the learning process.
9. Increase the learners' goal-orientedness.
10. Familiarize learners with the target language culture. (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998, p. 215).

The interaction of different aspects of motivation with a variety of personal characteristics means that what motivates some students may alienate others (Harlen & Crick, 2003). Students who possess learning goals rather than performance goals are more likely to also possess higher levels of intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy and self-concept. Taking the time to set personal learning goals with your students, as evidenced by the research compiled within this study, increases the intrinsic motivation levels we strive to help our students reach on a daily basis. It is equally important to keep students motivated once they have internalized the desire and have understood the process. An open and positive classroom climate, organized lessons, and an enthusiastic instructor are just a few keys to maintaining and enhancing motivation levels. Help students feel that they are valued members of your classroom community. Contextualize their learning by helping them understand how the skills they are learning and the knowledge they are gaining can be applied in their everyday lives. Hold high academic performance standards, and strive to design lessons and projects that provide an avenue for students to share new knowledge and ideas with their peers.

Conclusion

Well, all of this is okay in theory, right? Do these strategies really work? Does increased self-efficacy, motivation, and higher levels of expectation really increase test scores and success rates? How about some proof? Although I can only report on my own students in my own

classroom, I have practiced some of the strategies mentioned and have brought the theories into my daily lessons and interactions with my students and have enjoyed great success. This past year was my fifth year teaching. For the past five years, students in my classroom have consistently demonstrated a passing rate on the New York State Proficiency Exam (Spanish) of between 86 percent and 90 percent of the students earning their high school LOTE credit (with a passing grade of 65 percent or higher). This year's results are in. For the school year 2007–08, 19 students took the exam and 17 earned a passing grade (89.4 percent of students passing). The breakdown is as follows:

<u>Student</u>	<u>Exam Grade</u>	<u>Classroom Type</u>
1	97%	15:1:1
2	95%	8:1:1
3	92%	8:1:1
4	87%	8:1:1
5	82%	8:1:1
6	82%	8:1:1
7	82%	15:1:1
8	81%	15:1:1
9	81%	15:1:1
10	80%	15:1:1
11	80%	15:1:1
12	78%	15:1:1
13	74%	8:1:1
14	73%	8:1:1
15	70%	15:1:1
16	69%	8:1:1
17	69%	8:1:1
18	59%	15:1:1
19	56%	15:1:1

Although the two students who did not earn passing grades on the exam were disappointed, they made sure they let me know that they had no intention of giving up. They plan on retaking the course as ninth graders and passing the exam then. I believe they will.

It is my sincere hope that studies, discussions, and data collection continue in this area of foreign language study to ensure the eventual success of all students regardless of educational challenge. Foreign language educators without a background in special education need and should be given training on the different classifications of disabilities and how they may manifest themselves in the classroom. They should also request and receive, possibly through an on-going in-service or staff development program, support and training to become equipped with

techniques and strategies needed to assist students with special needs in acquiring a second language to the best of their individual abilities.

My desire is to eventually see all students, regardless of ability, being welcomed into an engaging and encouraging foreign language classroom, possessing a high level of motivation and self-concept, and developing functional proficiency in the language of their choice.

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