

# PLuS Perspectives

## Information about College Students with LD

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### Meeting the Challenge:

### Oral Language Disabilities

My deficits are severe and involve...audio discrimination processing, sequencing information,... new language acquisition and more.... Today as a doctoral student, I use assistive technology, student help, tutors and accommodations in the classroom. I am still learning about my disability and how to ask for what I need.... I accept that it will take me much longer to complete certain tasks than it does other people. Being an adult with learning disabilities is often challenging, so I use positive self-talk, affirmations and creative visualization to keep me on track and moving forward in my life.... I can't get my childhood years back ...but I can work towards a successful future. Life is just too short to dwell on the past or on one single negative thought! There are too many things I want to learn!

Madeline Harcourt is a doctoral student in the College of Education at the University of Hawaii. (Source: Idonline.org, retrieved 7/28/07)

Oral Language competence is a complex set of skills that involve both understanding and using language. College students are expected to have well developed abilities in understanding and expressing language content (meanings) and language structures (sentences and discourse). They must also be able to use language flexibly for many purposes and in a wide variety of academic and social contexts.

College students with learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may experience difficulties with oral language. These difficulties are often subtle but nevertheless can have a significant impact on learning in college because of the very high level of expectations for language competence in university settings.

Not all students with LD or ADHD have oral language difficulties but those who do *can* be successful in college. They can develop listening and study strategies as well as techniques for expressing ideas that help them compensate for spoken language difficulties.

#### Characteristics of Students with Oral Language Difficulties

Student with LD may experience the following subtle difficulties:

- ◆ Processing language more slowly, so it *seems* as if others are speaking too quickly to keep up with lectures or class discussion.
- ◆ Being slow to learn or use discipline-specific academic vocabulary.
- ◆ Knowing what they want to say, but having difficulty finding the right word or struggling to express ideas clearly. These students are often perceived as "quiet."
- ◆ Problems with figurative uses of language, e.g., literary devices, idioms, and words with multiple meanings.
- ◆ Missing the point of humor that is based on language (e.g., puns) and wondering why everyone is laughing but them.
- ◆ Feeling uncomfortable socially because conversation swirls around them too quickly and they often "don't get it."
- ◆ Difficulty discerning a speaker's implicit message or intention.

Students with ADHD may experience:

- ◆ Difficulty paying attention to spoken language for extended periods.
- ◆ Problems remembering the details of what was said.
- ◆ Frustration with having to listen and take notes at the same time.
- ◆ Being easily distracted or losing their train of thought while speaking.



# PLuS Perspectives Continued

## Oral Language Difficulties and Foreign Language Requirements

Some student who have subtle difficulties with their first language have significant difficulty learning another language. Terry, a college student, says:

...I was not able to really ever accomplish French. I took French for 3 years in high school. I did not move out of the first level. Eventually the teacher passed me out of it. This is the God's honest truth—I made a Quiche Lorraine, stood up in front of the class, and named the ingredients for my final. It was just awful! I just wasn't capable of it.<sup>1</sup>

Most colleges allow a waiver or course substitutions for students with LD who demonstrate severe difficulty learning another language. After two years of beginning Spanish, Michael says:

My experience with learning foreign languages at college has been disturbing and disheartening, at best. ...I have great difficulty processing novel language forms... I have very real problems in hearing individual syllables and the pronunciation of words in other languages, which makes it difficult for me to distinguish some words from others, and thus to participate actively in class. ...I was granted a waiver of the foreign language requirement. My learning problems have hurt my grades...but despite these considerable stumbling blocks, I continually face my weaknesses and rely upon my strengths to obtain the best education possible.<sup>2</sup>

### How Staff and Faculty Can Help in the Office

When meeting with a student:

- Preview the topics to be discussed (advanced organizer).
- Keep language clear and concise.
- Ask whether the student would like to take notes or to have you take notes.
- Review the main points discussed.
- Make or have the student make a list or calendar of actions to be taken (with deadlines).
- Plan a follow-up contact to check on progress on action steps.

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### How Faculty Can Help in Class

The following suggestions were provided by DePaul faculty:

- Provide previews, sign posting, reiteration, summaries.
- Tape, video, or podcast all classes—allows easy review.
- Put course material on BlackBoard—provides multiple sources of information.
- Have a student use the computer/projector or flipchart to take notes in real time.
- Provide hand-outs.
- Provide outlines for students to take notes on.
- Use a variety of models/styles of presentation.
- Use varied class set-up.
- Use face-to-face circle (if class size permits) - it eliminates the 'back row.'
- Employ experiential learning.

<sup>1</sup> Terry Bromfield— in A. J. Roffman. ((2000). Meeting the Challenge of Learning Disabilities in Adulthood. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes. p 220.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Sanders – In P. Rodis, A. Garrod, & M. L. Boscardin. (2001) Learning Disabilities and Life Stories. Boston: Allyn & Bacon. P. 53-54

