

The Dynamics of Language Program Direction

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Identifying and Instructing At-Risk Foreign Language Learners in College

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Who is the at-risk foreign language (FL) learner in college?¹ Does this student need a substantively different kind of instruction from other not-at-risk learners? What do FL educators, particularly teaching assistant (TA) coordinators, need to know about identifying and serving this population in college settings? More important in the present context, what do FL program coordinators need to know about this topic and pass on to their TAs?

We begin by introducing the reader to the idea that there are otherwise capable students who are at risk for FL study, and we describe a case study. We then provide a historical background review of at-risk learners, devoting considerable attention to research on the connections between native and FL learning. From there we move into the heart of the chapter, an explanation of what we believe FL educators should know about how to identify and serve at-risk FL learners. By chapter's end we hope to have provided FL educators with the answers to the questions we raised in our first paragraph.

At the outset, we should clarify our perspective as “outsiders” to the field of FL learning, our position on the relationship between native language and FL, and our belief that FL learning—like native language ability—exists on a continuum. Neither of us is a FL educator. However, we

both have had extensive experience diagnosing and educating individuals with native language learning difficulties. Further, because of our interest in and concern for FL learners with known histories of native language learning problems (students with learning disabilities [LD]), we have conducted considerable research on at-risk FL learners in both high schools and colleges. As a result of these explorations, we support the position of FL researchers, such as Skehan (1986, 1991) and Carroll (1962, 1973), who suggest a positive relationship between one's native language aptitude and aptitude for learning another language. Skehan (1986) identifies this relationship when he says that FL aptitude is "the second or foreign language equivalent of a first language learning capacity" (pp. 200–01). In our review of relevant literature we provide empirical support for this position and show how variables such as anxiety, motivation, and learning styles, often thought to influence capacity to learn a FL, may be a result of relative difficulties with language. We call this the "linguistic coding deficit hypothesis" (LCDH), which is described and defended in the historical background review of at-risk learners. We also support Carroll's (1962) "model of school learning," which ascribes individual differences in FL learning to two major factors: the learner's overall language ability and variables related to instruction. We modify this model by suggesting that difficulty with one of the components of language—phonological processing—can affect overall language ability.

Case Study

John is a student enrolled in first-semester Spanish at a medium-size public university. He is in a class of 25 students and has failed each of the first four quizzes and the first examination. When called on in class, he seems eager to participate but rarely responds with a correct or complete answer. Poor pronunciation, lack of vocabulary knowledge, and inability to use correct grammar in the FL characterize his performance. Yet during conversations before and after class, the instructor finds that John's native language skills seem well developed. He is a verbal, animated, and personable individual. He has visited the instructor's office several times to ask for assistance and she has provided suggestions about ways in which he might improve his performance. During these conversations John told her that he had taken two years of Spanish in high school and had made mostly B

grades in the first year and C grades in the second year. However, he confided that after two years of classes he still could not really speak or understand the language, and that his spelling in the FL was poor. He also indicated that his grades in other academic courses were usually A's and B's. Recently, the instructor has noticed that John is not raising his hand in class to volunteer answers and casts his eyes downward when she asks a question of the entire class. When called upon, he seems anxious and responds only with single, isolated words, or short phrases. Initially, John appeared motivated and had a positive attitude toward the class. Lately, he appears less motivated and comes unprepared to class.

Most FL instructors have encountered students such as John. Often, they will identify three, four, or even five students like him in a given introductory or intermediate class. John is an enigma because he seems to be bright and his native language listening and speaking skills appear to be commensurate with those of his classmates. What makes John different from other students who are able to learn a FL? Why do some students earn A's and B's in non-FL courses but achieve C's or lower in a FL course? Why do some students achieve B's in the first quarter of a FL course but then watch their FL grades decline in the second, third, and fourth quarters? Why do some students encounter so much failure in the FL, failing in one, two, or even three FLs?

In our view, John is an underachieving or at-risk FL learner. Pimsleur, Sundland, and McIntyre (1964) define FL underachievers as those who achieve average and above-average grades in their other subjects but struggle in a FL course. At-risk FL learners are those who have a history of: 1) native language learning problems (problems with reading, writing, listening, speaking); 2) FL learning problems; and/or 3) learning disabilities (LD; see references by Sparks, Ganschow, and colleagues). Early FL researchers such as Pimsleur, current ones such as Skehan, and native language educators such as ourselves have speculated that the at-risk, or underachieving, FL learner has an underlying native language deficit. This assumption forms the basis for our speculation that successful native language learning serves as the foundation for successful FL learning, a view that we have expressed in the LCDH (Sparks & Ganschow, 1991; Sparks, Ganschow & Pohlman, 1989). We also have hypothesized that affective factors such as low motivation, poor attitudes, and high anxiety for FL learning are generally the consequences of native language learning difficulties and their resulting effects on FL learning. Evidence for this speculation is presented next.

Historical Background of At-Risk FL Learners

Generally, FL educators have assumed that if students learn to speak and listen to their native language, they should have little difficulty learning a FL (Neufeld, 1978). Although Gardner (1985) suggests that this view fails to take note of the wide variations in native language skill development, since the 1970s FL educators have focused primarily on affective variables such as low motivation and negative attitudes (Gardner, 1985), high levels of anxiety (Horwitz & Young, 1991), ineffective use of language learning strategies (Oxford, 1990), or mismatch of teacher/student learning styles (Oxford, 1990) as explanations for failure to learn a FL. Until recently, the language-based nature of FL learning problems has been virtually unexplored. In the 1960s Pimsleur and others (Pimsleur, 1966b; Pimsleur, Sundland & McIntyre, 1964) studied FL “underachievers” and found that these students lacked “auditory ability,” a skill characterized by poor sound discrimination and difficulty with sound-symbol learning. Harvard counselor Kenneth Dinklage described a population of students who were unable to fulfill that university’s two-year FL requirement. Dinklage (1971) found that despite these students’ above-average to superior intelligence, they exhibited FL learning problems in one or more of three distinct areas: 1) memory for sound and words; 2) reading and writing; and 3) listening and speaking. Dinklage compared these poor FL learners to students with dyslexia, or a reading disability. Carroll (1962, 1981, 1985) posited that FL aptitude consists of four language variables: phonetic coding, grammatical sensitivity, inductive language learning ability, and rote memory. These four variables comprise the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) (Carroll & Sapon, 1959). Despite the development of the MLAT and another FL aptitude test, Pimsleur’s Language Aptitude Battery (LAB) (Pimsleur, 1966a), FL educators have not vigorously pursued language-based explanations for FL failure (Skehan, 1986).

In the 1980s anecdotal references to the FL learning difficulties of students with recognized language learning problems—students with LD—began to appear. (See Sparks, Ganschow & Javorsky, 1992, for a list of these references.) Here, inferences were made about the language-based nature of LD and the relationship of native language problems to difficulties with FL learning.² Levine (1987) described a variety of FL learning problems that students with LD were likely to encounter, which were similar to the problems they had encountered with native language learning. In our early explorations in the field, we examined the test profiles, native

language learning histories, and FL learning histories of 22 students who had failed FL courses and subsequently been exempted from their university's FL requirement. All of the students were found to have difficulty with one or more aspects of their native language. From our case studies, we hypothesized that these at-risk FL learners had underlying "linguistic coding" deficits (see Vellutino & Scanlon, 1986) that hindered their learning of a FL. Those who had phonological (sound) difficulties (close to two-thirds of the students) failed the FL in the first or second semester of the first year.

The first empirical study of at-risk FL learners was conducted with college students with LD in the late 1980s. Gajar (1987) compared students' performance on the MLAT and found that students with LD scored significantly lower than FL-enrolled non-LD students on the MLAT Short and Long Forms and all its subtests. Ganschow, Sparks, Javorsky, Pohlman, and Bishop-Marbury (1991) compared the performance of 15 successful college FL learners (who achieved A or B averages in two semesters of college-level FL courses) and 15 unsuccessful college FL learners (who had failed and received a waiver from the college FL requirement) on a battery of intelligence, native oral and written language, and FL aptitude tests. No significant differences in intelligence were found between the two groups. However, significant group differences were found concerning native language measures of phonology (for example, spelling and word recognition) and syntax, but not semantics. Unsuccessful FL learners also scored significantly poorer on the MLAT Long and Short Forms and on specific MLAT subtests, which supported Gajar's study.

Since that time, we have conducted numerous empirical studies with good and poor FL learners. (See all references to Sparks, Ganschow, and their colleagues.) The results of these studies have shown that good and poor FL learners exhibit significant differences in their native language phonological (and sometimes, syntactic) skills and FL aptitude (as measured by the MLAT). For example, Sparks, Ganschow, Javorsky, Pohlman, and Patton (1992a) compared low-risk and high-risk high school students enrolled in first-year FL courses in college preparatory programs, using cognitive, native language, and FL aptitude measures. Significant differences between the two groups were found on all phonological and some syntactic measures and the MLAT Long and Short Forms. No significant group differences were found on semantic measures. In a related study, Sparks, Ganschow, Javorsky, Pohlman, and Patton (1992b) assessed a group of students with LD who were also enrolled in first-year FL courses and

compared them to the low-risk and high-risk groups on the same cognitive, native language, and FL aptitude measures. Significant differences were found between the low-risk and LD groups on all phonological and syntactic measures. However, no significant differences were found between the high-risk (non-LD) and LD groups on most measures of phonology and syntax. Only the spelling measures differentiated the high-risk and LD groups. More importantly, no significant differences were found among the three groups on any of the semantic measures. Similar results have been obtained in studies with other secondary (Ganschow, Pohlman, Artzer & Skinner, 1992; Sparks & Ganschow, forthcoming a; Sparks & Ganschow, in preparation) and postsecondary level students (Ganschow, Sparks, Anderson, Javorsky, Skinner & Patton, forthcoming; Ganschow, Sparks, Javorsky, Pohlman & Bishop-Marbury, 1991). The studies also have not found verbal short-term memory differences between low-risk, high-risk, and LD learners enrolled in FL classes.

Other recent empirical studies we have conducted provide additional support for the LCDH. In a recent study, students with high levels of anxiety identified through Horwitz's Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986) were found to have significantly lower native language phonological and oral language skills and FL aptitude (on the MLAT) than students with low anxiety identified by the FLCAS (Ganschow, Sparks, Anderson, Javorsky, Skinner & Patton, forthcoming). We have also shown that students with lower levels of motivation or less positive attitudes toward FL learning have weaker native language skills (Javorsky, Sparks, & Ganschow, 1992; Sparks, Ganschow & Javorsky, forthcoming). In a recent study we found that two of the best four predictors of first-year, final FL grades (among a population of highly select high school females) were phonological measures (Sparks, Ganschow & Patton, submitted).³ Research conducted with at-risk populations of college-bound students taking FL courses has consistently shown that at-risk students have weaker phonological (and sometimes, syntactic) skills than semantic skills, and have FL aptitude standard scores on the MLAT below their native language scores.⁴

The results of these studies have led the authors to speculate the following: 1) difficulties with the meaning of language (semantics) and rote memory are not primarily responsible for the FL learning problems of at-risk and LD learners; 2) the efficiency of the linguistic codes may play a large part in one's success or failure in FL courses; 3) affective differences are likely, in most cases, to be the consequence of native language and FL

learning problems; 4) difficulties with the phonology of language are related to FL learning problems in otherwise high-achieving secondary and postsecondary students; 5) high-risk FL learners who have not been identified as having LD perform similarly on native language and FL aptitude tests when compared to diagnosed LD students who have identified native language learning problems; and 6) problem FL learners are a heterogeneous group—there is not a distinct population of students with a “foreign language learning disability.” Based on our investigations to date, we would suggest that FL learning problems occur along a continuous distribution of very strong to very weak FL learners and that there may be distinct “prototypes” of good and poor FL learners (see Sparks & Ganschow, 1993; Sparks, Ganschow & Javorsky, forthcoming).

Identification of FL Learning Problems

How might a FL educator determine if a student is likely to be at risk for FL learning problems before he or she begins a FL class or evaluate a student who is currently having difficulty in a FL class? FL educators are not psychoeducational diagnosticians, nor should they be required to become proficient in the diagnostic evaluation process. However, it is possible for FL educators to become familiar with ways in which to assess informally students with FL learning difficulties and to draw upon assessment results prior to referring a student to the college handicapped student services or LD coordinator for diagnosis. Elsewhere, we have described an assessment battery that can be used by diagnosticians, counselors, or other school personnel who regularly conduct thorough psychoeducational evaluations (Ganschow & Sparks, 1993; Sparks, Ganschow & Javorsky, 1992). The battery draws upon the “linguistic coding deficit” model in its selection of tests and is presented here.

A brief but comprehensive evaluation for the assessment of secondary and postsecondary students with FL learning problems involves four components: 1) review of the student’s developmental history; 2) review of the student’s academic learning history; 3) review of the student’s FL learning history; and 4) administration of standardized and nonstandardized measures of native language skills and FL aptitude.

Review of Developmental History

When asking questions about students’ developmental history, a FL educator is seeking information that might reveal a history of difficulty with

language development. For example, students with FL learning problems have often been found to have histories of speech articulation difficulties, delayed development of language, and speech/language therapy before the age of 10. An early family history of speech and language difficulties is often the precursor of later native language reading and writing difficulties (Catts & Kamhi, 1987; Wallach & Butler, 1984). We have also found that native language learning problems may be related to later FL learning problems (Ganschow & Sparks, 1991).

Review of Academic History

Reviewing copies of a student's high school and college transcripts can be revealing. Often, a perceptive reviewer will notice lower grades in English courses or in subjects that involved larger amounts of reading and writing than in other academic courses. Some students with FL learning difficulties will say that they disliked reading, spelling, and English more than other courses and will report having had difficulties with reading and spelling in the primary grades. Often they will note that they did poorly in "phonics" lessons in the first and second grades. Sometimes students' early difficulties in reading were so pronounced that they were enrolled in remedial reading courses or received private tutoring in reading and spelling. Some students will reveal that they are still not very good spellers, dislike reading, and rarely read for pleasure. Finally, students may have chosen a major or course of study that does not depend heavily on reading and writing. The presence of problems such as these is a diagnostic indicator of possible native language learning difficulties.

Review of FL Learning History

The primary purpose in this part of the review is to ask the student to describe his or her FL learning difficulties. If a student was previously enrolled in FL courses at any level, a FL educator should ask the student to provide his or her grades in those courses because it may be only in the FL that significant language learning problems occur. In many cases the student with FL learning difficulties did not fail the FL course(s), but did achieve low grades. Often, this student made lower grades in his or her FL courses than in other academic courses. Usually, students with FL learning problems will explicitly state the problems they have experienced in FL classrooms. Common problems include inability to comprehend sentences or questions in the FL, difficulty formulating oral responses, difficulty with pace of the FL (that is, time allowed by the instructor to comprehend

and/or speak the FL), presentation of too much course material at one time, instructor talking too fast, difficulty with grammar, and inability to spell words in the FL. Most students with FL learning problems do not describe difficulties with the rote memory aspects of the FL course, nor do they experience problems with the learning of vocabulary words and short phrases. However, they do admit experiencing problems when the vocabulary and phrases are combined with the grammatical rules of the FL and are then used in conversation. They often have great difficulty with written quizzes and exams. Students with FL learning difficulties may do somewhat better with oral tests, but their performance begins to erode when the amount and difficulty of the course content increases.

Standardized and Nonstandardized Testing

Although most FL educators are not trained to administer tests, some specific measures of native language skill and FL aptitude are not difficult to use and can greatly assist the FL educator in determining if a student has language learning problems or if a specific “linguistic coding deficit” is present. Students with FL learning problems will rarely exhibit “global” native language learning deficits, that is, native language deficits in the phonological, syntactic, and semantic codes. Most of these students have obtained average or better grades in college preparatory courses in high school because their language comprehension and vocabulary skills were intact. Thus they were expected to do well in FL courses. Generally, the student with FL learning problems will exhibit a deficit in a specific linguistic code (phonology, syntax, or semantics). Research conducted by the authors has shown that the deficit usually occurs in the phonological (sound) and sometimes in the syntactic (grammar) codes.

Although measures of aptitude have not been popular in FL circles for a number of years (see Skehan, 1986), the authors have found them helpful in distinguishing low- and high-risk FL learners when they are interpreted within the context of the linguistic coding hypothesis: if a student has low FL aptitude, he or she is likely to have a native language linguistic coding deficit(s). The MLAT (Carroll & Sapon, 1959), which can be administered in approximately one hour, is composed of subtests that measure four independent variables that contribute to FL learning: 1) phonetic coding; 2) grammatical sensitivity; 3) inductive language learning ability; and 4) rote memory. In our experience, most students with FL learning difficulties score below the 50th percentile on the MLAT Long Form. Because the MLAT is composed of four separate independent variables, it is

conceivable that a student might score above the 50th percentile on some subtests (for example, rote memory) and below the 50th percentile on others (for example, phonetic coding or grammar), but still obtain an overall average score on the Long Form. Thus, each MLAT subtest must be evaluated independently and then compared to a similar measure of native language skill (for example, MLAT Phonetic Coding with native language pseudo-word reading and phonemic awareness; MLAT Words in Sentences with native language grammar).⁵ Pimsleur's LAB (Pimsleur, 1966a) is also helpful in diagnosing "linguistic coding" deficits. Subtests III (Vocabulary) and IV (Language Analysis) comprise a Verbal Ability score and measure semantic and syntactic skills. Subtests V (Sound Discrimination) and VI (Sound-Symbol Association) comprise an Auditory Ability score and measure phonology. The entire test requires only 40 minutes to administer. The LAB yields a Total Test Score, but it would not be surprising to find moderate to significant variation between the Verbal Ability and Auditory Ability subtest scores. Generally, students with FL learning difficulties will have a lower score on the Auditory Ability (phonological) subtests, which will co-occur with native language phonological problems. (See Table 1 for descriptions of the MLAT and LAB.)

Table 1

List and Description of Foreign Language Aptitude Tests

Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT): Tests foreign language aptitude using a simulated format to provide an indication of probable degree of success in learning a foreign language; includes five subtests. The Long Form consists of all five subtests and the Short Form consists of three subtests (III, IV, and V). The subtests are:

Part I (Number Learning): Student learns numbers of a made-up language, and then transcribes spoken number words into written digits on hearing them presented rapidly.

Part II (Phonetic Script): Student listens to a sequence of syllables (many with no meaning in English) while looking at their graphemic transcriptions and is asked to quickly learn how the sounds (phonemes) correspond to the letters (graphemes).

Part III (Spelling Clues): Student reads English words presented as abbreviated spellings (for example, "luv") and then chooses the one word (out of five) that corresponds most nearly in meaning (for example, carry, exist, affection, wash, spy).

Part IV (Words in Sentences): Student reads a “key” sentence in which a word is underlined, reads another sentence in which five words and phrases are marked as possible choices, and chooses the word or phrase in the second sentence that has the same grammatical function as the marked word or phrase has in the “key” sentence.

Part V (Paired Associates): Student studies a list of nonsense words with their assigned English meanings.

Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery (LAB): Tests foreign language aptitude using four factors thought to contribute to success in foreign language learning; includes six subtests. The LAB yields a Total Test score (Subtests 1–6), a Verbal Ability score (Subtests 3 and 4), and an Auditory Ability score (Subtests 5 and 6). The subtests are:

Part 1: Grade point average in academic areas other than foreign language.

Part 2: Interest in learning a foreign language.

Part 3: Vocabulary—word knowledge in English.

Part 4: Language Analysis—ability to reason logically in terms of a foreign language.

Part 5: Sound Discrimination—ability to learn new phonetic distinctions and to recognize them in different contexts.

Part 6: Sound-Symbol Association—association of sounds with their written symbols.

If FL educators are knowledgeable about standardized tests, they could administer tests of native language skill. In most cases, however, this type of testing should be administered by a trained psychoeducational specialist. In the native language areas, it is important to obtain measures of phonology, syntax, and semantics. Phonological testing can be accomplished by using word recognition, pseudo-word (nonsense-word) reading, spelling, and phonemic awareness measures.⁶ Syntactic testing can be implemented by asking the student to provide a spontaneous writing sample about a specific topic. (Also, the oral interview provides an excellent sample of a student’s syntactic skills in his or her native language.) Semantic testing can be accomplished by the administration of a reading comprehension test and vocabulary, analogy, and antonym/synonym measures. A comprehensive battery of tests and their diagnostic use in each of these three linguistic codes has been described in detail elsewhere (see Ganschow & Sparks, 1993; Sparks & Ganschow, 1993; Sparks, Ganschow & Javorsky, 1992). A list of these tests is provided in Table 2.

Table 2

List of Test Instruments to Measure Native Language Linguistic Coding Skills

PHONOLOGY

Woodcock Reading Mastery Test-Revised (WRMT-R), Forms G and H:

Word Identification Subtest

Word Attack Subtest

Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery (WJPEB) and
Woodcock-Johnson-Revised (WJ-R):

Letter-Word Identification Subtest

Word Attack Subtest

Lindamood Auditory Conceptualization Test (LAC), Forms A and B

Wide Range Achievement Test-Revised (WRAT-R): Spelling Goldman-Fristoe-

Woodcock Sound-Symbol Tests (GFW):

Spelling of Sounds Subtest

SYNTAX

Test of Written Language-2 (TOWL-2), Forms A and B¹

WJPEB Written Language Cluster

Dictation Subtest

Proofing Subtest

Informal Writing Sample

SEMANTICS

Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised (PPVT-R), Forms L and M

Woodcock-Johnson Psychoeducational Battery (WJPEB):

Antonyms-Synonyms Subtest

Picture Vocabulary Subtest

Analogies Subtest

Woodcock Reading Mastery Test-Revised (WRMT-R):

Word Comprehension Subtest

Passage Comprehension Subtest

*Test of Language Competence-Expanded Edition (TLC-E)*¹

*Test of Adolescent Language-2 (TOAL-2)*¹

¹*Vogel (1986) has found that most standardized oral and written language tests are not normed on young adults. The TOWL-2, TLC-E and TOAL-2, although not normed on college-age students, may be used with a college population, however, if a comprehensive language battery is needed.*

Analysis of Data

In most cases, students with FL learning difficulties will exhibit a problem in at least one, and sometimes two, of the linguistic codes. Generally, the difficulties will not be so severe that a student's native language deficit(s) are obvious to the FL educator. Instead, the deficits are subtle and must be found through diagnostic testing. The student's self-reported developmental, academic, and FL histories may provide data that help in decisions about in-class accommodations, FL course placement, or referral for further testing. If FL educators do some of their own testing, they should look for problems in one or more of the linguistic codes. On FL aptitude tests, for example, students with subtle native language learning difficulties typically achieve scores that range from the 25th to 50th percentile. On the LAB the Auditory Ability (phonological) score would usually be lower than the Verbal Ability score. Generally, the native language profile that a student with FL learning difficulties will display is to score at or above the 50th percentile in two linguistic codes (syntax and semantics) and in the 25th to 50th percentile in the other code (phonology). Table 3 depicts both good and poor FL learner "prototypes." Three of the poor FL learners exhibit linguistic coding deficits. The other poor FL learner possesses average to above-average "linguistic coding" skills in all three "codes," but suffers from affective intrusions (for example, low motivation, high level of anxiety). Generally, we have found this latter "prototype" to be doing poorly in all of his or her school subjects. (See case study in Sparks & Ganschow, 1993.) The poor FL learner with low phonological skills but strong semantic skills is likely to be the most common "prototype" (Sparks & Ganschow, 1993).

The four-part diagnostic process outlined here may require some new learning by FL educators. However, the potential positive outcomes of implementing the process means that students can be quickly evaluated and then provided with appropriate assistance to deal with their FL learning difficulties.

Instructing At-Risk FL Learners

Interventions for at-risk learners range on a continuum from modest accommodations in regular classroom settings (the least restrictive alternative) to waiver/course substitution (the most drastic alternative). Each alternative is described here, along with suggestions for who should be considered for this alternative and what FL educators should know about the alternative. Table 4 depicts this continuum and options within it.

Table 3

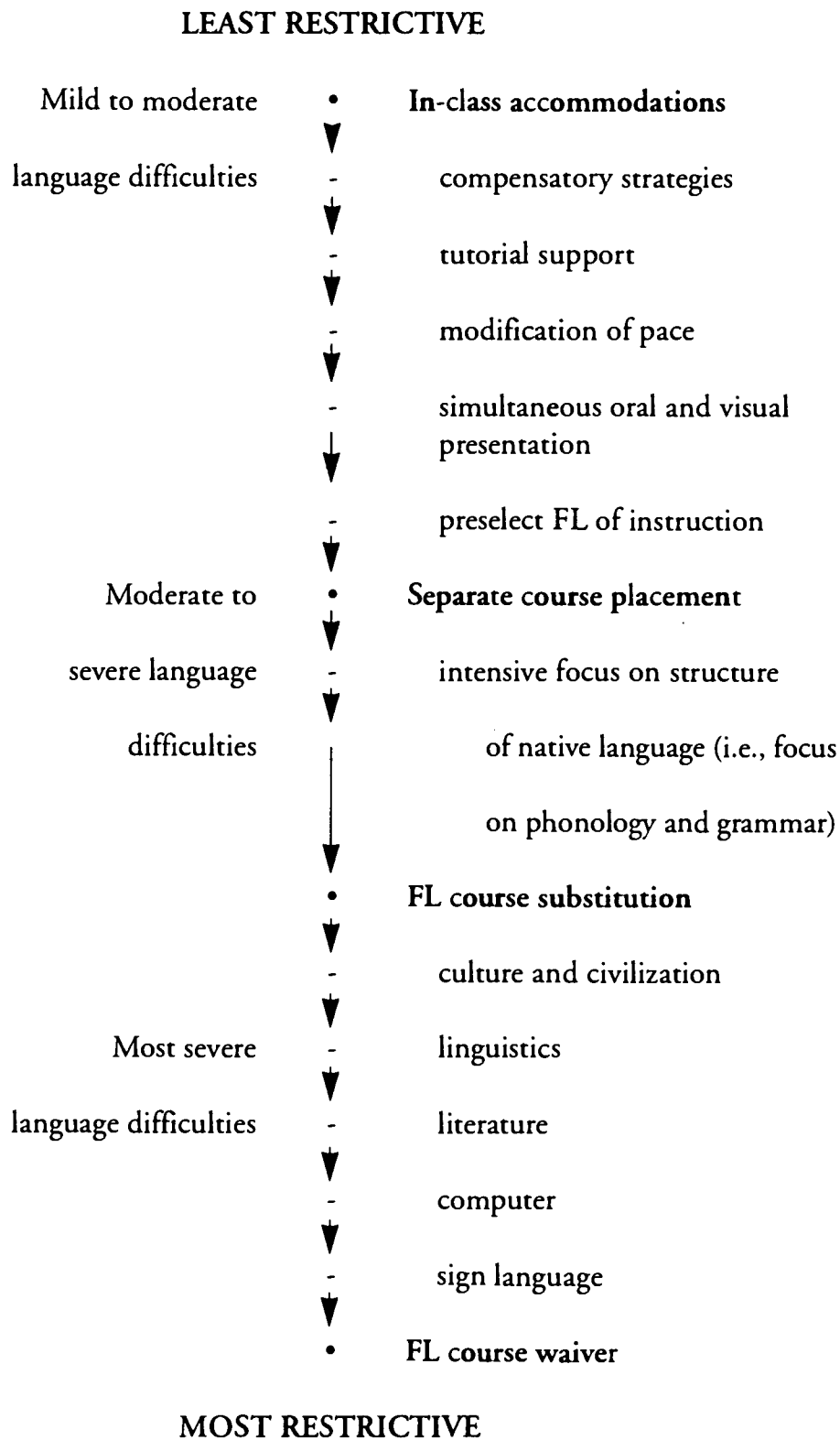
Prototypes of Student Profiles Based on LCDH

Successful foreign language learner	At-risk foreign language learner	At-risk foreign language learner	At-risk foreign language learner*	"Unsuccessful" foreign language learner
High semantics	Low semantics	High semantics	Low semantics	High semantics
High syntax	High/Low syntax	High/Low syntax	Low syntax	High syntax
High phonology	High phonology	Low phonology	Low phonology	High phonology
No difference in IQ (Average/above average)				
Average/above average IQ				
Affective "intrusions"				
Poor grades in most subjects				

*We call this at-risk learner the "garden variety" poor foreign language learner (Sparks & Ganschow, 1993). "Garden variety" is a term coined by Gough and Tunmer (1986) to describe individuals with reading problems who exhibit "lags," or low-average and below-average performance not only on an intelligence test but also in all oral and written language skills (word recognition, reading comprehension, spelling, listening comprehension, speaking).

Table 4

Continuum of Interventions for Students with FL Learning Problems



Within-Classroom Accommodations

The least restrictive alternative for at-risk learners is within-classroom accommodations, suggested for students with mild to moderate language difficulties in native language and FL aptitude. Accommodations include: (1) provision of compensatory strategies; (2) tutorial support; (3) modified pace of instruction; (4) simultaneous oral and visual presentation of classroom instruction; and (5) selection of a FL appropriate for a given student.

Compensatory Strategies

In LD research numerous strategies are reported to be helpful for students (see Mangrum & Strichart, 1988; Vogel, 1986), and many are required by law for students identified as handicapped (Section 504). In self-reports of a group of identified students with LD enrolled in FL courses, many of the strategies reported were found to be more essential, desirable, or necessary for these learners than for non-LD FL learners (Javorsky, Sparks & Ganschow, 1992). Table 5 presents a list of some of these strategies. Perhaps surprising to FL educators is one finding of the Javorsky et al. study that auditory tapes were significantly less helpful to these at-risk learners than to non-LD learners. The results are not surprising, however, in light of research that has shown that students with native language learning problems, including phonological deficits, have relatively weaker listening skills (see Sparks & Ganschow, forthcoming b). FL educators who have struggling at-risk learners should request a meeting with the student to discuss ideas for accommodations. We have talked with students who have worked out "deals" with their professors, such as not being required to respond orally in class or being allowed to take exams in an alternative manner. With these modest compensations, some students have been able to complete a FL course sequence successfully.

Tutorial Support

Tutoring remains the most common support option available for at-risk FL learners (Ganschow, Myer & Roeger, 1989). We recommend that the FL educator encourage the student to seek tutoring at the first sign of a problem. If the student has a documented LD, the coordinator for handicapped student services should be called upon to assist the tutor and instructor in planning the tutoring sessions. The tutor and instructor together should monitor the student's progress and look for strategies the student might use in order to experience success in the FL. Here we would emphasize careful structuring of the lesson, distributed practice, and simultaneous oral and

Table 5**Compensatory Strategies for At-Risk FL Learners**

- Untimed tests
 - Taking exams in separate rooms (distraction-free environment)
 - Essay exams rather than objective exams; oral rather than written exams
 - Seating in front row near instructor
 - Making syllabus available before official start of class
 - Allowances for misspelling, especially in test situations
 - Selection of professor who understands student needs for compensatory strategies and is willing to accommodate him or her
-

visual presentation of materials by the tutor so the student can both see and hear what is presented. Together tutor and instructor should document the student's sessions, especially if the student fails to progress. Should progress not be made, the student should be referred for a diagnostic evaluation, and documentation by the tutor and instructor of a concerted effort on the part of the student should be provided.

Instructional Pace

Because the pace of instruction in a college-level FL course is usually considerably faster than it is in a high school course, we generally recommend that an at-risk FL student repeat the same language in college. This way, the student will have a "head start" on the language. Nonetheless, in our experience, by the end of the first semester at-risk learners have lost the initial gain of several years of high school instruction. Unfortunately, individualizing instructional pace is not a realistic option in most FL settings. However, some success has been reported where separate classrooms are created for these learners to allow for a slowed-down curriculum and extensive opportunities for practice (Downey & Hill, 1992). Experimentation in regular classrooms, for the most part, has consisted of audiotaped instruction where students listen to and work at their own pace. As mentioned earlier, however, audiotapes alone have not been reported to be particularly helpful, according to self-reports of a group of at-risk learners (Javorsky, Sparks & Ganschow, 1992). In general, FL educators should be sensitive to the fact that not all learners can proceed at the same pace. To the extent possible, students who could learn with a slowed-down pace

should be counseled on ways to obtain additional practice—for example, by taking fewer courses during the period of FL study or interspersing easy with difficult courses. Careful monitoring by students of their amount of studying is advised.

Simultaneous Oral and Visual Presentation

Another classroom compensatory strategy found to be beneficial to both at-risk and non-at-risk students is combined oral and visual presentation of material. The assumption here is that students who have difficulty hearing the breakdown of a stream of sound into individual words and who have not internalized the spellings of the words represented orally will benefit by simultaneously hearing and seeing the language (Bilyeu, 1982). Students might be presented with simple scripts to follow as the instructor verbalizes the language. Further enhancement of these language structures could occur if the students simultaneously see, say, and then write the language structures. The FL instructor might try this approach a few times and obtain feedback from his or her class. Handouts might be made for those students who indicate that they benefit from this approach.

Language of Instruction

Certain languages may be more beneficial than others for given students, depending on their language strengths and weaknesses and the instructional orientation (Downey & Hill, 1992; Fisher, 1986; Ganschow & Sparks, 1987). However, to date, there is no empirical evidence to support this speculation. We are currently examining the case of one student who repeatedly failed French and Spanish but is succeeding well in Latin. The student has above-average phonological skills and average to above average syntactic skills but has weak semantic ability. (See “prototype” in Table 3 and the case study in Sparks & Ganschow, 1993.) Downey and Hill (1992) have reported anecdotally that they have begun to try to identify students for a particular FL based on individual diagnostic profiles. Based on research in native language learning, however, Sparks and Ganschow (forthcoming b) have hypothesized that long-term phonological deficits have an impact not only on reading and writing skills but also on listening comprehension and oral expression. Thus, the learning of a FL in which listening and speaking are necessary may be extremely difficult for students with phonological, syntactic, and/or semantic deficits.

Separate Course Placement for At-Risk Learners

Next on the continuum of instructional alternatives is separate course placement, recommended for students with moderate-to-severe language difficulties who have experienced FL failure and frustration. This alternative, not commonly found in either high schools or colleges/universities, has met with success in several schools that have reported this option. Examples of separate course placements include: an alternative course on the structure of native language, reported at Boston University (DeMuth & Smith, 1987); a specialized one- to two-year high school FL course emphasizing multisensory instruction and direct teaching of the phonology and grammar, reported at two private college-preparatory schools in Cleveland and Baltimore (Sparks & Ganschow, forthcoming a; Sparks, Ganschow, Kenneweg & Miller, 1991; Sparks, Ganschow, Pohlman, Skinner & Artzer, 1992); and a two-semester course designed especially for at-risk learners, emphasizing careful structuring and sequencing of the FL in a success-oriented environment with small class size, reported at the University of Colorado (Downey & Hill, 1992).

FL educators should be aware that a separate class placement option takes time to plan, background knowledge on how to structure the classroom and materials, and a commitment by the school to provide the necessary resources and staff training.

FL Course Substitutions/Waivers

This alternative is recommended for students with severe native language difficulties (especially in phonology) and weak FL aptitude. The waiver/substitution is recommended if the school cannot provide direct remediation utilizing specially trained FL staff. Generally, the student will have a history of unsuccessful attempts at learning a FL or extreme difficulty, often dating back to high school or earlier. The student will often have a documented early history (in grade school) of LD.

To implement this alternative, the FL educator will need to contact the academic dean's office to inquire about the college's FL course waiver/substitution policy. A recent survey of FL petition policies and procedures at colleges and universities across the country (Ganschow, Myer & Roeger, 1989) showed that most of the responding colleges required study of FL in at least one program area. Over 60% of the responding schools had a policy for waiver/substitution, but it was usually part of the general petition process at the college. The FL educator can help the failing student gather

documentation to support the student's petition. This documentation should include a letter from the FL instructor documenting the student's attempts to learn the FL and types of problems encountered. The FL educator should refer the failing student to the appropriate advocate on campus, usually either the coordinator for handicapped services, an LD coordinator, or an office of learning assistance. Should the university not have a petition process, the reader is referred to articles that describe how to advocate for a procedure at a college or university (Freed, 1987; Philips, Ganschow & Anderson, 1991).

Obviously, the waiver/course substitution is an extreme alternative and should be used only when all else has failed. However, it should be a viable option to avoid the following: 1) the student dropping out of school or going on probation because other courses suffer at the expense of hours spent on FL study; 2) the student having to change majors; or 3) the student moving from one FL to another because he or she cannot complete the commonly expected two-year FL requirement.

Summary

At the beginning of this chapter we asked: 1) who is the at-risk FL learner? 2) what do FL educators and TA coordinators need to know about identifying and instructing this population and be able to pass on to their TAs? and 3) does the at-risk FL learner need a substantively different kind of instruction from the non-at-risk FL learner? We summarize our responses to these questions here.

The at-risk FL learner is a student who has a history of subtle or overt oral and/or written native language learning problems. This student may or may not have been diagnosed as having a learning disability (LD). The at-risk learner may have avoided taking a FL in high school, failed a FL in high school or college, or passed the FL course but exhibited difficulty with FL learning. When tested, the student generally has difficulties with one or more of the "linguistic codes," usually the phonological code. However, there is a small number of students who have strong phonological skills, but who exhibit weak syntactic and/or semantic skills.

FL educators can participate in the screening of students with FL learning problems by following a four-step diagnostic process. A review of the student's developmental and academic histories will often reveal overt or subtle native language learning difficulties, particularly with reading, spelling, and written language. Sometimes, the at-risk FL learner has an

early history of speech and language difficulties. Often, the at-risk FL learner has struggled with, barely passed, or failed in previous FL courses. Although the FL educator generally does not administer diagnostic tests, it is possible for a FL instructor to administer a FL aptitude test and/or selected nonstandardized, native language measures.

The at-risk FL learner usually will require a modified form of instruction in order to experience success. The continuum of instructional alternatives ranges from least restrictive alternatives for those students with mild and moderate language difficulties to most restrictive alternatives for those students with the most severe language difficulties. With supportive FL instructors who are willing to modify the language curriculum in appropriate ways, many at-risk FL learners may be able to have a successful FL learning experience.

Notes

1. The authors contributed equally in the preparation of this chapter.
2. In the 1970s LDs were thought to be perceptually-based, that is, based on problems with “visual” or “auditory” perception. However, there is now much converging evidence indicating that LDs are the result of language-based difficulties (Stanovich, 1986; Vellutino, 1979; Wallach & Butler, 1984; Wiig & Semel, 1980). Generally, students with LD exhibit a discrepancy between their overall intellectual ability on a standardized test of intelligence (IQ) and academic achievement in one of seven areas: 1) basic reading skill; 2) reading comprehension; 3) written language; 4) oral expression; 5) listening comprehension; 6) math calculation; and 7) math reasoning. We note, however, that the discrepancy definition of LD has encountered increasing criticism on both empirical and psychometric grounds (see, for example, Stanovich, 1991).
3. A regression analysis performed on the data yielded a best four model for predicting FL grade: 1) eighth grade English grade; 2) MLAT Long Form; 3) spelling, as measured by the WRAT—R Spelling subtest; and 4) phonemic awareness, as measured by the Lindamood Auditory Conceptualization Test (LAC) (see Sparks and Ganschow, 1993, for a description of the WRAT-R and LAC).
4. For example, at-risk FL learners generally score in the average and above-average range on native language semantic and syntactic mea-

asures. Their native language phonological scores are usually in the low-average to below-average range. In most cases, their score on the Long and Short Forms of the MLAT are lower than their scores on native language phonological measures.

5. We generally do not recommend administering only the MLAT Short Form because it omits Subtest II, Phonetic Coding, a measure of phonology. Subtest III, which is included in the Short Form, has been described by Carroll (1985) as a "disguised" vocabulary test. However, it is in part a measure of phonology because the student must "crack" a phonological code to access the vocabulary.
6. The use of the term "phonology" does not refer primarily to the ability to pronounce words in either the native language or the FL. It may include pronunciation but refers specifically to the ability to learn sound (phoneme)/symbol (grapheme) correspondences and discriminate speech sounds. Phonemic awareness involves "meta-awareness" of the phonological system of a language because a student must be able to segment phonemes within words (for example, *clump* has five phonemes, c-l-u-m-p) and identify sound segments in words.

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