Editorial

Conceptualizing Change: A proposed Shift in Global Discourse Surrounding Disability in Language Teaching

Conceptualización del cambio: una propuesta de cambio en el discurso global en torno a la discapacidad en la enseñanza de idiomas

Conceptualização da mudança: uma proposta de mudança no discurso global em torno da deficiência no ensino de línguas

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LACLIL ISSN: 2011-6721 e-ISSN: 2322-9721 VOL. 13, No. 1, JANUARY-JUNE 2020 DOI: 10.5294/laclil.2020.13.1.1 PP. 9-25

To reference this article (APA) / Para citar este artículo (APA) / Para citar este artigo (APA)
David, R. D. & Torres, C. (2020). Conceptualizing change: A proposed shift in global discourse surrounding disability in language teaching. *Latin American Journal of Content & Language Integrated Learning, 13*(1), 9-25. https://doi.org/10.5294/laclil.2020.13.1.1

ABSTRACT. This editorial proposes a conceptual and instructional shift surrounding educating English learners with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities are the largest minority group in the world, yet in many classrooms across the world, they often lack the opportunities and support needed to be successful. This is especially apparent in English as a second or foreign language classrooms, where students with disabilities need first to be included and then provided with structured and systematic supports to be successful. We suggest that an initial shift in the way that we think about disability is a necessary first step. This can then be supported by using Universal Design for Learning as a framework to reduce barriers in instruction and increase access and success for English learners. This editorial also introduces five articles, which aim to further the discourse and understanding of how to support individuals with disabilities learning English across countries and contexts.

Keywords (Source: Unesco Thesaurus): Disabilities; learning disabilities; English learning; teaching English; inclusive education; access to education; special needs education; universal education.

RESUMEN. Este editorial propone un cambio conceptual e instructivo en torno a la educación de los estudiantes de inglés con discapacidades. Las personas con discapacidades son el grupo minoritario más grande del mundo. No obstante, en muchos salones de clase alrededor del mundo, frecuentemente, carecen de las oportunidades y el apoyo necesarios para ser exitosos. Esto es especialmente aparente en las aulas de Enseñanza del Inglés como Segunda Lengua o como Lengua Extranjera, donde los estudiantes con discapacidades requieren, primero, ser incluidos y, después, recibir apoyos estructurados y sistemáticos para alcanzar el éxito. Nosotros sugerimos que un cambio inicial en la forma en que pensamos acerca de la discapacidad es un primer paso necesario. Entonces esto puede ser respaldado a través del uso Diseño Universal para el Aprendizaje como un marco para reducir las barreras en la instrucción e incrementar el acceso y el éxito de los estudiantes de inglés. Este editorial también introduce cinco artículos que apuntan a ampliar el discurso y entendimiento de cómo se puede apoyar a individuos con discapacidades que se hallan aprendiendo inglés a través de los países y contextos.

Palabras clave (Fuente: tesauro de la Unesco): discapacidades; dificultades de aprendizaje; aprendizaje del inglés; enseñando inglés; educación inclusiva; acceso a la educación; educación para necesidades especiales; educación universal.

RESUMO. Este editorial propõe uma mudança conceitual e educacional em torno da educação dos alunos de inglês com deficiência. As pessoas com deficiência são o maior grupo minoritário do mundo. No entanto, em muitas salas de aula ao redor do mundo, eles geralmente não têm as oportunidades e o apoio necessários para serem bem-sucedidos. Isso é especialmente aparente em salas de aula de Ensino de Inglês como Segunda Língua ou como Língua Estrangeira, onde os alunos com deficiência precisam ser incluídos primeiro e, em seguida, receber suporte estruturado e sistemático para ter sucesso. Sugerimos que uma mudança inicial na maneira como pensamos sobre a deficiência é um primeiro passo necessário. Isso pode, então, ser apoiado pelo uso do Design Universal para Aprendizagem como uma estrutura para reduzir as barreiras à instrução e aumentar o acesso e o sucesso dos alunos de inglês. Este editorial também apresenta cinco artigos que visam ampliar o discurso e a compreensão de como os indivíduos com deficiência que estão aprendendo inglês podem ser apoiados em vários países e contextos.

Palavras-chave (Fonte: tesauro da Unesco): deficiências; dificuldades de aprendizagem; aprendizagem do inglês; ensinando inglês; educação inclusiva; acesso à educação; educação para necessidades especiais; educação universal.

Introduction

Acquiring a second or additional language may come easily for some learners, yet for others, it can pose a challenge that may seem impossible to overcome. Though there are numerous reasons for individuals to have difficulties learning a given language, there is one particular group of learners who may face additional challenges in the second language acquisition process: those who have diagnosed and undiagnosed disabilities that range from learning disabilities to physical disabilities (Kormos & Smith, 2012). It is estimated that about fifteen percent of the world's population is affected by some kind of disability (Root, 1994; World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011). However, there is little discussion on, first, how to understand this population, particularly among language learners. Second, there is a need to address the pedagogical issues in curriculum design and instruction to ensure that all learners are not only able to acquire an additional language, but are also able to demonstrate their learning in ways that are effective, meaningful and low or non-anxiety producing.

Even more troubling is the common practice in English as a second language (ESL) classroom to reclassify this population of learners as needing "special education," where the majority of these learners ultimately get stuck in the reclassification bottleneck (Umansky et al., 2017; Kangas, 2018; Schissel & Kangas, 2018). In addition, although we know that some learners with disabilities benefit from special education classes and services, research suggests that, in these settings, language learners typically do not receive as rigorous instruction or the language development instruction that is necessary for them to be successful (Zehler et al., 1994). Some research even suggests that English learners who are placed in special education classes can see decreases in performance, rather than improvement (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002). In the case of the English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms, learners with disabilities are often exempt from foreign language instruction due to perceptions that acquiring a foreign language is beyond their abilities (Kormos & Smith, 2012). As language educators, we need to be on the frontlines promoting a shift in perception and in classroom practice.

LACLIL ISSN: 2011-6721 e-ISSN: 2322-9721 VOL. 13, No. 1, JANUARY-JUNE 2020 DOI: 10.5294/laclil.2020.13.1.1 PP. 9-25

The term *disability,* as used throughout, is defined as:

> An umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations. Disability is thus not just a health problem. It is a complex phenomenon, reflecting the interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society that he or she lives. (World Health Organization, 2011)

From this perspective, disability is indeed complex in nature and is as individualized as each person's own fingerprint. In addition, disability is an evolving concept (United Nations, 2006); it cannot be neatly sorted or compartmentalized, for living with a disability is an experience unique to the individuals' perception of self and the way they negotiate meaning with the outside world.

Global views of disability

With more than one billion individuals and roughly fifteen percent of the world's population living with a disability, it is clear that disability is a global issue, and there is a continual need to further the work surrounding disability-inclusive development (World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011, p. 7). Individuals with disabilities (both physical and otherwise) are more likely to experience adverse socioeconomic outcomes than those who do not experience life with a disability. These individuals often have less access to education, support during their studies, employment opportunities, and have higher poverty rates (Priestley, 2001). In addition, disability plays out in society as:

> A discursive construct that exists in the context of social relations and that, as such, has historically functioned as a mechanism of power used to marginalize some while privileging others through the fabrication and maintenance of rigid categories/dichotomies such as "normal" and "abnormal." (Carpenter, 2011, para. 1)

As with other dominant discourses, perceptions are shaped by those who have power to uphold the status-quo and maintain their

interests. Due to this persuasive categorization of disability that places the "self" as superior to the "other," a person with a disability in this case may choose to not disclose if they have an invisible disability, while individuals who believe that they may have a disability may not seek a diagnosis, so they do not find themselves placed in the category of perceived inferiority (Said, 1978; Fine & Asch,1988; Losen & Orfield, 2002). In fact, it is estimated that, in the United States, approximately 60% of high-school students with disabilities who continue with postsecondary education do not disclose their disability status to receive educational support (Newman, 2005), even though their civil rights allow them to receive accommodations. Another chilling fact that falls upon individuals already marginalized by their difference or disability is the uneven economic and political development that affects those living in what are referred to as "developing" countries. The World Health Organization (2018) estimates that around eighty percent of people who identify as having a disability live in the Global South, and many of these countries do not have the infrastructure and economic stability of the West. For an individual living with a disability outside of the Global North, accessibility and infrastructure are often addressed differently (Stone, 1999), and the kinds accommodations that are typical of the West are often not available. For example, buildings are often not equipped with elevators, and sidewalks are either uneven or do not exist. As a result, individuals with physical disabilities experience issues with mobility, while individuals with learning disabilities also face the same challenges acquiring access and assistance in educational settings due to the limited resources. Moreover, voices contributing to the field of special education and critical disability studies are often rooted in the West, and the problems of accessibility and access in the Global South are often perpetuated by looking for answers from these Western societies, which may not be applicable in other cultural contexts (Majiet, 1988; Montero, 1988; Priestley, 2001). In the case of education, the kinds of resources and assistance that are available to public school students in the Global North are likely to be far more advanced than the kind of tools and assistance that students in the global south may receive even within the private sector. For public school students in the developing world, the lack of resources and assistance is often debilitating.

LACLIL ISSN: 2011-6721 e-ISSN: 2322-9721 VOL. 13, No. 1, JANUARY-JUNE 2020 DOI: 10.5294/laclil.2020.13.1.1 PP: 9-25

Global views of disability in education

Of the global population of people with disabilities, it is estimated that between 93 million and 150 million are children (World Health Organization, 2011; United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 2007). Education is instrumental in a child's development, and this is no different for a learner with a disability. Language education is especially impactful, as it creates elasticity in the human brain and promotes the development of metalinguistic awareness, working memory, and academic achievement (Cummins, 1978; Han, 2011; Morales et al., 2013). Education creates a path for students to become active members of society and provides a route towards future employment opportunities. The practice of ensuring that all students, including those children with disabilities, receive a quality education should be a primary concern for all countries. Yet, according to the World Health Organization's (2011) World Report on Disability, children with disabilities are less likely to start school, and they have lower rates of completing both primary and secondary school. In addition, children with disabilities are less likely to be included in foreign language (Kormos & Smith, 2012) and often second language instruction, further limiting access and widening the gap between educational opportunities. The United Nations (2006) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) recognizes the rights of all children with disabilities, noting that students with disabilities should be included in the general education systems and should receive individualized support according to their needs. However, at the most basic level, educational institutions must comply with the disability legislation of their specific country. The kinds of assessment, support, and educational initiatives vary from country to country and how success is measured and monitored is also dependent on each country's Ministry of Education. This results in vast differences and often disparities in the type and quality of education that students with disabilities receive.

Regardless of the country's legislation, in order to include and support all students, students suspected of having a disability should be assessed by a qualified professional to diagnose if a disability is present. The next step in the process is to decide what kinds of instructional

accommodations and potentially modifications are needed to support the student. Decisions should be made about whether it is best for students to receive specialized instruction in a special education class or remain in the general education class with accommodations. However, this is often not the case in developing countries where resources and educational specialists are scarce. English language education continues to be a top priority for governments internationally (Wiley, 1995; Nunan, 2003), although there appears to be little thought on how to address the needs of diverse learners who may have trouble acquiring an additional language in the conventional EFL classroom. This poses a problem for English language educators in both the public and private sector, who note that oftentimes teachers do not have training or assistance to support their learners. This is also a challenge in English as a second language settings, which are experiencing an extreme shortage of teachers who have expertise in both language acquisition and development, as well as in disability support (More et al., 2015). This must be remedied by a greater focus on these student populations in all teacher education programs and with a focus on supporting and empowering learners with disabilities.

Repositioning and challenging predominant discourses surrounding disability

There is an international shift occurring in which individuals who identify as having a disability are choosing to use their disability as a platform to empower others, to have a greater control over their own lives, to demand participation and equality in society, and to have greater influence over the social structures in which they are forced to participate (Priestley, 2001). In the case of disabilities studies, researchers are deeply engaged in a dialogue that explores disability from a critical perspective to understand why society treats those who have disabilities unjustly and challenges dominant discourses surrounding individuals with disabilities who are also members of additional minority groups to recognize the role of race, gender, poverty, and class and how they intersect with disability. Scholars and advocates from

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various fields such as law, health studies, education, and social work are seeking ways to understand the existing legal, economic, and social rationales to push forth a shift in inclusion to remove the systemic barriers and oppression facing those who identify as disabled.

In the case of education, this shift is also taking place inside the walls of classrooms internationally through educators who continue to seek ways to support their students. This change is occurring in both special education programs and within the realm of English language teaching, in second and foreign language settings, to address the needs of all students by reconceptualizing how to ensure all students have access to materials and are able demonstrate their learning in ways that are responsive to their individual needs.

Pedagogy and practice

Ensuring that access to materials and providing options for students to demonstrate learning in ways that are aligned to their strengths shouldn't be a novel idea; it is an issue of equity and should be the primary goal of educators of all students. In addition, it should not be viewed as a burden or additional requirement or demand of teaching. Non-disabled mainstream students have been enjoying access to curriculum and education since the beginning of schooling, and it is only just that students with disabilities and language learners with disabilities can access and engage with education to the same extent.

Education should be more than just the transmission of knowledge. Education should be transformative and attempt to mitigate and counteract the effects of social oppression and discrimination that many people with disabilities and language learners face. Teachers can look to Critical Pedagogy as a guide, which argues that teaching must be transformative and use problem-solving and authentic situations with a focus on social justice to counteract the effects of societal oppression (Freire, 2017). Because content is the vehicle for language instruction, teachers can replace dry, irrelevant textbooks with relevant and authentic materials that engage language learners with disabilities on topics that are important and interesting to them and that

provide them with knowledge and tools that are powerful and transformative. A Critical approach has students tackle these topics through gathering information and thinking critically about challenging problems to come up with collaborative solutions (Ovando & Combs, 2011). This approach can be used to engage learners in issues of disability and language and access to examine their community and ways to make change, which can work to empower and include all learners.

A critical approach can be realized through content-based, or content and language integrated learning (CLIL) instruction, which has been shown to improve language development. This is because the thematic approach can be used to connect to learners' prior knowledge, and it creates higher repetition and frequency of form, vocabulary, and discourse patterns (Evans et al., 2010; Ortiz & Yates, 2001), which supports language development and is also be beneficial for many learners with disabilities. These are also components of effective culturally responsive teaching, which strives to connect students' lived experience and knowledge to learning through relevant topics and scaffolded collaboration in the classroom (Aceves & Orosco, 2014).

Even the most relevant topics will not result in learning or transformation by students with disabilities and language learners if they are not delivered through well-designed and supportive instruction. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is one such framework within which to intentionally and strategically situate these supports. UDL is a scientifically validated framework, which is built on the belief that teachers should investigate and mediate the barriers in their curriculum and instruction rather than taking the perspective and approach that the barriers are within the student (Meo, 2008). Another important shift embodied by UDL is in educators' perceptions of students with disabilities to "now see students with disabilities along a continuum of learner differences rather than as a separate category" (Meyer & Rose, 2000, p. 40). For as long as there have been schools, there has been a myth that there is an average learner, and it is for this mythical average that instruction is typically designed, but nothing could be further from the truth. When we design instruction for that average student who does not exist, the result is instruction that is designed for no students (Rose, 2013). The UDL framework can be used as a framework to guide teachers in designing their curriculum and instruction for all

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students so that historically marginalized groups like language learners and learners with disabilities are included, valued, and successful.

To design for maximum access, engagement, and learning for all, it is important to first understand that learner variability is the norm, and that variability is often systematic and predictable, and thus, can be designed for (Rao & Meo, 2016). This design cycle begins with first identifying and understanding learner variability, meaning learners' strengths, including their cultural diversity, language backgrounds, and funds of knowledge, their interests and preferences, and their challenges. With this as a starting point, Step 1 is to design manageable and accessible (often standards-based) language and content goals. Step 2 is to identify barriers in the curriculum so that teachers can design flexible assessment and then intentionally and proactively select and employ flexible methods and materials, which are Steps 3 & 4. Step 5 is to teach, and Step 6 is to reflect and revise (adapted from Rao & Meo, 2016). Many teachers are comfortable with selecting strategies to support language learners and students with disabilities, but they are often implemented without intentionality. Using the design cycle outlined above ensures that learner variability is taken into account, that flexible supports are intentionally and proactively delivered and aligned with effective language development principles, and that barriers in the curriculum and instruction are reduced to maximize student access and success.

The UDL guidelines are organized into the three main principles of providing Multiple Means of Engagement, Representation, and Action and Expression (CAST, 2018). Effective instruction can be designed using these guidelines and strategies (called "checkpoints") to provide language and learning support in the ways that have the most impact on language development, which are making input comprehensible, providing support for language production, and providing opportunities for feedback and repeated practice (Torres & Rao, 2019). These guidelines (CAST, 2018) can be used as a menu of support for teachers to draw on. Providing Multiple Means of Representation helps to make the input comprehensible for students as it is presented in different forms and with support for comprehension. For example, something as simple as providing textual materials electronically to allow language learners or learners with text and reading-related disabilities to change the fonts to be more readable or to use text-to-speech with

hyperlinked definitions can go a long way to making the text accessible to all. Providing Multiple Means of Action and Expression validates learners' variability with options for using media or a variety of tools and technology to practice and build fluency with language and learning. For example, allowing students to record their responses to an assignment rather than writing them or providing print and online graphic organizers to support students when their responses must be written. Finally, but possibly most essential, providing Multiple Means of Engagement includes heightening interest with individual choice, relevance, and authenticity as well as developing community through collaboration. In addition, this includes attention to the affective domain and the support for self-regulation, which has been shown to be an important skill for learners with disabilities to sustain persistence with challenging tasks and be successful. Keeping in mind that learner variability is the norm, and rarely more evident than with language learners with disabilities, there is no one approach that will work for all learners, which is why multiple means are the key. If this is all implemented through a content and language integrated learning (CLIL) instruction in a UDL framework with a focus on support for learners with disabilities and language learners, we may begin to close the equity gap by providing access to instruction for all.

In this issue

This special issue of *LACLIL* seeks to contribute to dialogue surrounding disability in the world of English language teaching and foreign language teaching by publishing a selection of articles from authors from various parts of the world. This special issue also seeks to add to the ongoing discussion that is occurring on an international level. This is one example of the work that is being done on an international level to address diverse learners and their needs within the educational system. The voices and experiences of educators in the field have the ability to shape the work of others and have the power to change lives.

Each article seeks to offer international perspectives on language learning and support for students with disabilities. In doing so, the *LACLIL*

LACLIL ISSN: 2011-6721 e-ISSN: 2322-9721 VOL. 13, No. 1, JANUARY-JUNE 2020 DOI: 10.5294/laclil.2020.13.1.1 PP. 9-25

Journal is advocating for a more inclusive model of education that includes everyone rather than excluding those who have additional issues acquiring a language regardless if they have a diagnosed disability or not. Additionally, this special issue of *LACLIL* calls for a shift in English language education on a macro level, noting that the stakeholders and the government level need to rethink how they approach disability and difference, not only in general education but in the foreign language classroom. Only then can we, members of the international community, truly meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations, 2018) of offering quality education to all young learners. If nations do not address disability and difference in their educational narrative, then surely we will not be able to achieve the goals outlined by the United Nations and learners with disabilities will continue to be left behind.

In the coming pages you will see articles that explore ways to support students with disabilities and differences in the ELT classroom. This series of articles is as diverse as the contexts in which these authors teach and demonstrates a shift in ELT teacher education. It is our hope the LACLIL Special Issue on Supporting Students with Disabilities will be enriching to your practice and will inspire you to make pedagogical and curricular shifts in your language instruction to ensure that all learners receive instruction that is accessible, comprehensible, and in turn can change lives.

In the article entitled *A Guide to Systematizing Support for Students with Disabilities in Postsecondary EFL,* Young provides a set of practical guidelines for establishing an institutional or department policy and procedure to ensure the students with disabilities receive services such as accommodations, supports for access, and educational support where these kinds of measures many not have already been put into place. He proposes a set of steps to ensure successful implementation that can be put into place in an EFL post-secondary context.

In the pages of *The Tension between English as a Second Language and Special Services for Emergent Bilinguals with Disabilities*, Lopes-Murphy provides an in-depth look at the debate surrounding the prioritization of services for emergent bilinguals with disabilities noting that disability-related services have typically taken priority over English as a Second Language services, but this results in emergent bilinguals not re-

ceiving the necessary language development support and instruction. Thus, with the continual growth of emergent bilinguals in the public-school sector, the need for well-trained educators is more apparent than ever. Hence, this article seeks to further the discourse occurring around the practice of placing emergent bilinguals into special education and prioritizing their disability needs rather than fully addressing their linguistic needs.

In *EFL Education for the Visually Impaired in Japan: A Small Scale Study*, Carpenter shares his findings on teachers perceptions of teaching visually-impaired learners by describing what teachers believe are the best practices to support visually impaired English language learners and what kinds of challenges visually impaired learners face as they move forward with their educational goals. He outlines five core themes and describes how accommodations can be too limiting.

In *Universal Design for Learning Assessment: Supporting ELLs with Learning Disabilities*, Delaney and Hata describe practical strategies for the implementation of assessment that is rooted in the Universal Design for Learning approach at the tertiary level. In doing so, their suggestions move towards a more holistic form of assessment that builds executive functioning and provides an avenue for all learners to demonstrate their understanding of a given task.

In *Dyslexia in a Global Context: A Cross-Linguistic, Cross-cultural Perspective*, Maunsell reviews existing research on dyslexia noting that educators must address language learning and the needs of dyslexic learners from various linguistic and cultural positions to ensure that learners receive instruction that is meaningful and meets their needs. In doing so, Maunsell addresses the dyslexia debate, noting that the term *dyslexia* is often misunderstood, and research has focused its attention on monolingual speakers. Yet, there is a growing need for researchers and educators alike to develop a keen understanding of this area in relation to second-language learning so that educators can support culturally and linguistically diverse students with dyslexia.

In Sowell and Sugisaki's article, entitled *An Exploration of EFL Teachers' Experience with Learning Disability Training*, the authors explored the training related to accommodating students with disabilities that a group of teachers in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts received. It also investigated, for the teachers who had received training,

LACLIL ISSN: 2011-6721 e-ISSN: 2322-9721 VOL. 13, No. 1, JANUARY-JUNE 2020 DOI: 10.5294/laclil.2020.13.1.1 PP: 9-25

if this training helped them improve their teaching practice. This paper calls EFL teacher training related to learning disabilities and accommodations to improve accessibility to English language instruction within the EFL context.

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LACLIL ISSN: 2011-6721 e-ISSN: 2322-9721 VOL. 13, No. 1, JANUARY-JUNE 2020 DOI: 10.5294/laclil.2020.13.1.1 PP. 9-25