

Foreign Language: Part 2

The issue of foreign language, thankfully, did not come up again during graduate school. My “substitutions” of computer programming and statistics were difficult, but at least I legitimately made it through them.

During graduate school, however, was when I learned I am dyslexic and hearing impaired. These revelations about myself were shocking and caused an emotional rollercoaster, but the stories about this is for another time. I had not thought about how these disabilities could have affected my ability to learn a foreign language until I was setting up my independent practice in Tucson. At the time I was buying and procuring all the testing and assessment tools I needed to offer assessments for adults with specific learning disorder, and/or AD/HD as well as the common disorders that were known to often go hand in hand with those disorders at the time. Part of this process was to attempt to find a method of assessing people for “disabilities in learning foreign languages” in order that they could get course substitutions and/or special help to aid them in learning a second language. I had heard this topic of difficulty come up in conversations at conferences, but no one had any suggestions of how to do this.

At the time there was no internet, so I was relegated to the old fashioned internet scouring the stacks at the local university libraries. After a protracted time I found nothing on the topic. The one evening while watching a news documentary program I learned of the Defense Language Institute which is part of the U.S. military. Apparently they were excellent at determining who could learn languages quickly and who could not as well as the best at teaching languages. The next morning I mailed a letter to them asking them for information regarding their screening and training methods. Several months passed, and I had forgotten about the letter. Then one day a letter arrived from the Pentagon! Not connecting it to my forgotten letter I was shocked and curious about it. There was no question it was addressed to me. Inside was a very friendly and professional letter from a colonel informing me he could not answer my questions because they involved classified materials, but he gave me the names of the civilian researchers that helped the military develop their language assessment and training methods and perhaps I could work with them to develop similar civilian systems for the disabled. I was bummed because I was hoping there was an off the shelf assessment and training program I could buy. The idea of “developing something” was not, too appealing.

As an aside, I wondered for a moment if the military contacted the FBI and asked them to start a file on me because of my letter, but I guess I will never know.

Anyway, I contacted the two professors by mail. Several weeks passed with no reply. Again I was surprised upon checking my office mail slot. There was a huge bundle in it. Upon opening it I found the professors sent me a copy of every one of their articles regarding foreign

language disability, or what they called “Linguistic Coding Difference” (LCD). They stated they did not believe this was a disability per se, but a difference one could have in how they processed language that could make it difficult to acquire a second language. A person could have specific learning disorder and have LCD, but not every person with a specific learning disorder as LCD. Additionally not everyone with LCD has a specific learning disorder. This goldmine of information still occupies a large space on one of my bookshelves, and I have written notes and dog eared every page through the 20 plus years I have had it. I would guess about 90% of the professional articles related to problems learning a new language was written by these two professors. I am not including their names because I do not have their permission to use them and beside this is a story of my experiences with foreign language.

The professors found that those with LCD often had significant difficulty with phonemic awareness, perhaps to the level seen in a dyslexic, perhaps not. The person may have a slight weakness, not enough to cause the person to be dyslexic, but just enough to cause them significant difficulty learning a new language. The phonological processing difficulty would make it difficult for the person to process the different phonemes of the new language, and hence put them at a disadvantage in learning it when compared to their peers without this difference.

The professors found that having a problem in phonemic working memory may cause LCD. Having a small working memory span and/or having slow working memory processing could cause LCD. Not being able to process enough phonemes and/or phonemes fast enough in class as the teacher spoke could constitute LCD.

Finally, a person could have one of the three above in sufficient quantity weakness, or any combination of the three in sufficient quantity to constitute having LCD.

The professors proposed a way to screen for LCD using standardized tests and history. Eventually, they published methodologies of how to screen for LCD that many universities used when granting foreign language substitutions and waivers. The professors and their students developed college foreign language curriculums modeled off multisensory synthetic phonics approaches of teaching reading to dyslexics similar to the Orton-Gillingham. This started getting traction in post-secondary education. It offered a third option to those with LCD to course substitution and course waivers.

Simultaneously, I learned that many student with LCD took course like symbolic logic, and/or computer languages as a course substitution. Others may take American Sign Language as a way to get around their phonological difficulties. I had even heard of students taking “rare” languages like Navaho, or Swahili to fulfill their language requirement. The reasoning behind this was as follows. Professors of such courses have a difficult time finding enough students to register for these courses and often they will not have enough student to enroll in them to

be able to teach them. Hence, they often will do about anything to get students to take their courses and will provide their student loads of extra help to make sure they make it through their course.

One fascinating seminar I attended at an international conference was conducted by some professors from Gallaudet University (the national university for the deaf in Washington, DC) regarding how they taught foreign language. In the over 100 years of the university's existence only a handful of students were given foreign language waivers. Those that were all pre-lingually deaf. The other students would take the sign languages of other countries/cultures, and/or courses on other cultures, etc. Most of the students were given heroic tutoring so they could acquire their second language.

Eventually, a few other professors offered their own insights into how to screen and treat LCD. But, slowly the professors who had spearheaded the movement started to question that LCD existed. This began when they began doing longitudinal studies of such students and investigating the elementary and high school grades of such students in foreign language classes. More often than not such students received passing grades in foreign language in high school and not, too uncommonly they would receive A's or B's. This did not indicate they had a lifelong problem of acquiring a second language so the professors started to doubt LCD existed. In fact, I do not believe they think it exists today.

I recall receiving A's and B's in my high school Latin for Alter Boys classes. This by the professor's model would indicate I did not have LCD. My C's in college Spanish would not indicate it either. However, if one would actually look at my proficiency in both languages immediately after taking the courses, and especially for my college Spanish course how many more hours of work I had to put into them compared to my peers, with far less learned, I believe I am living proof that LCD exists.

For those interested in reading about the research on LCD you can click on the "presentations On Disorders" link on the top of this page and when the window opens click on the "Linguistic Coding Difference (Difficulty Learning Foreign Language)" link to see a PowerPoint presentation on the topic.