

**LEARNING A SECOND LANGUAGE –EVERYONE’S RIGHT OR
NOT RIGHT FOR EVERYONE?**

BY

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ABSTRACT

This paper set out to explore the experience of learning a foreign language for secondary pupils (12-16 years) in Scotland whose first language is English and who have a communication disorder of the high functioning autistic type.

The research was carried out by a survey in Spring 2001 across Scotland of 66 pupils considered to be high functioning autistic individuals or to have Asperger syndrome. Twelve percent of these pupils were found to have additional dyslexic difficulties. The pupils were located in either mainstream schools or communication disorder units attached to these. The survey found that 20% were not learning a Modern Foreign Language (MFL) at that time, and of the remainder the majority were being taught in mainstream MFL classes rather than a unit. From questionnaires returned and observation in one CDU, for which a case study was done, it appears that there may be barriers to accessing the MFL, particularly in mainstream, specific to the researched group. These are summarised in the Epilogue as a grid of communication-disordered learners' characteristics for a MFL, which highlights common strengths as well as weaknesses. The conclusion from this part of the research was that those with the highest cognitive level and least additional impairment will access the MFL curriculum most easily and indeed a few will do extremely well.

Where there is added dyslexia, ADHD or a lower cognitive level, more support is likely to be required from a support teacher or by teaching in a unit. The MFL at Access 2 and 3 level, which are taught and assessed in the case study CDU, may be a MFL programme well suited to those with these additional needs. Teachers working with CD pupils generally felt that a MFL may be particularly beneficial to this group as it gives extra practice in developing social skills. The research indicated that although dyslexia and high functioning autism are both disorders of communication in often able pupils, the two impairments are distinct and require differing support. Unlike those with dyslexia, the CD group focussed on in the research tend to cope well with processing the verbal content of academic work and with tackling logical left hemisphere activities.

The study also investigated the views of the case study pupils and parents on the MFL. The results were a positive endorsement of this as a learning experience, and it

was not perceived as a more difficult subject than other non-practical ones. When asked to rank subjects in order of their usefulness in meeting these pupils current and future needs, the MFL was placed in the top half along with English, mathematics, social and community skills, computing and science.

In conclusion, this research study suggested that learning a MFL is not only each pupil's right, but also right for them, and that they should receive the due MFL entitlement as all others.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

ADHD	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
ASD	Autistic spectrum disorder
GME	Gaelic medium education (programme)
IEP	Individualised educational programme
(M)CDU	(“Mountfield”) communication disorder unit
MFL	Modern foreign language
NLD	Non-verbal learning disorders
P 6-7	Primary 6-7. In Scotland the age range is approximately 10-12
PSD	Personal and social development
PSE	Personal and social education
RQ	Research question
S1-4	Secondary 1-4. In Scotland the age range is approximately 12-16
S5	Secondary 5. In Scotland the age range is 16-17
SEED	Scottish Executive Education Department
SfL	Support for Learning

PROLOGUE

The aim of this research paper is to explore the experience of learning a second language for higher functioning communication disordered pupils, some of whom may have additional dyslexia. The study will only consider those pupils in Scotland whose native language is English and who are of an age to learn a modern foreign language, such as French.

In recent years the number of pupils being diagnosed with autism has increased considerably and this study will focus on the group who are said to have high functioning autism or Asperger syndrome, and who are identified and found in mainstream secondary schools and associated bases or units. Some are receiving support in modern language classes, others are not. Some are not even given the opportunity to study a foreign language, some are withdrawn specifically from this subject. Yet all are fledgling EU citizens who soon will have the full rights to which they are entitled and in their lifetime most aspects of daily life are likely to become of a pan European nature. Also, as e-mail and the internet generally become even more common place in usage, these youngsters need to acquire some basic Euro tools – language and cultural awareness minimally – to be able to take advantage of what potential there is, perhaps through the use of ICT.

As a modern foreign language (MFL) teacher in a communication disorder unit (CDU) attached to a secondary school, (Mountfield Secondary School in Glasgow), which was opened following the recommendations in the Scottish Office paper: “The Education of Children with Language and Communication Disorders” (1996), it is professionally relevant for me to have a better understanding of how the 15 or so pupils I have worked with over the past three years compare with others in this special group.

Not only are such units such as the Mountfield CDU still thin on the ground in Scotland, ours being the first secondary one in this city, but resources across Scotland vary considerably, resulting in different levels of support offered, and variations in the way barriers are addressed, differentiation achieved and level of attainment expected.

For example, few provisions have an in-house MFL specialist and rely on integration into mainstream classes as the only way to offer this subject. Whilst mainstream integration is currently seen as the best way forward for the majority of children with special educational needs, including those diagnosed with an autistic spectrum disorder, the mainstream MFL classroom may be a daunting and unsuccessful experience for some.

This paper will look at the legal basis for inclusion and evaluate the results of my research into what barriers for this group, including those with added dyslexia, can be identified. It will consider how these can be tackled, and what opinions about MFL learning teachers, parents and pupils may have, which justify it on their secondary curriculum.

This paper will build on the Support for Learning Diploma input which raised my awareness of possible barriers for those with special educational needs and allowed me to put into practice some strategies for tackling them with autistic pupils in the Mountfield CDU (MCDU.) As I am at the forefront of teaching and developing materials for Access 2/3 French in the Unit, and at the same time increasing my autism knowledge through the post graduate Diploma in Autism, I ought to be well placed to do the research required for this project. Little research has been done anywhere on this specific area and my findings may therefore be of interest to others working in this particular area.