

# Should Students with Dyslexia Take a Foreign Language?

Many students with dyslexia receive recommendations that they should avoid learning a foreign language. A common rationale is that these students need more time and instruction to focus on English instead of adding another language.

The article “[At-Risk Students and the Study of Foreign Language in School](#)” from the International Dyslexia Association website says, “students who have difficulties in most or all of the four language systems are likely to experience the most problems learning a foreign language, particularly in traditional language classrooms.” This article also points out that most foreign language teachers are not trained to identify specific learning needs, nor are they trained to provide specific accommodations. Considering all these factors, should dyslexic students learn foreign languages?

As a foreign language (Chinese/Mandarin) teacher, I say YES.

As we know, having dyslexia means a student will have difficulty processing the written form and the sound structure of language. Therefore, it may seem like learning a foreign language is an impossible mission for students with dyslexia.

However, teaching foreign language with a [multisensory structured language teaching approach](#), a well-researched method for teaching students with dyslexia, can be effective. (In fact, it can work for ALL learners in the classroom, not just students with dyslexia.)

Multisensory structured language teaching involves the simultaneous use of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic-tactile pathways to enhance memory and learning of written language. The approach is systematic, explicit, direct, and focused on the structure of language.

The article from the IDA goes on to list some strategies for foreign language teaching:

- Teach language concepts in a logical progression and help students to categorize concepts.
- Systematically and explicitly teach the speech sound of the foreign language.
- Model the way to break apart words and sentences while reading.
- Use several learning channels simultaneously (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) to teach a language concept.
- Use color coding for gender, verb/noun agreement, and other matching principles in the foreign language to highlight a concept.

In my Chinese class, I have seen many students with dyslexia succeed because almost all the student response is oral. I also have visuals such as pictures and the spelling of words readily

available. Oftentimes, I ask the students to write down the spelling ([Pinyin](#)) while saying the word/phrase/sentence to reinforce the connection between sound and form. Since Chinese is a tonal language, I use color coding to help students distinguish different tones. I also assign hand gestures for some words such as “say” and “go.”

The Chinese writing system (Chinese characters) has always been a challenge for my students, so I do writing and drawing activities with my class to help connect the kinesthetic-tactile pathways. Using play dough to create characters or practicing calligraphy is also fun and presents another learning modality.

I have had dyslexic students who have not experienced much success in other subjects enjoy and succeed in Chinese class. Learning a foreign language provides many opportunities for students, and it would be a shame for us to deny these benefits to students with dyslexia.

- **Kaini Gu**, SMARTS Intern

Posted December 14, 2017 January 3, 2018 SMARTS