

---

# Instructional Practices for Students with Language-based Learning Disabilities Enhance Literacy and Learning for All Students

Robert J. Broudo, M.Ed.

---

*Breaking the cycle of school failure, juvenile delinquency and long-term dependency while creating independent learners at all levels*

**L**anguage is the primary vehicle by which we acquire and convey knowledge. To learn *any* subject *all* students need a strong foundation in language skills. They must learn how to read, spell, write, and communicate orally. Each one of these essential skills requires mastering multiple tasks. Reading, unlike speaking one's native language, does not come naturally. One must be taught to match sounds with letters and build words from groups of letters. To write, one must learn formal writing strategies (e.g. how to construct a sentence, a paragraph, an essay). To communicate effectively, one must be able to organize one's thoughts. In addition, to achieve academically, *all* students must acquire and employ a host of concrete organizational and problem solving skills, including: *how* to take notes; *how* to know what to listen for in lectures; *how* to conduct research; *how* to analyze an assignment and develop strategies to complete it.

Students who have difficulty mastering these fundamental skills face many obstacles to learning. Every subject—not just English or Language Arts—has language processing demands embedded in its content and assignments. Mathematics is especially difficult because numbers are processed in the brain in the same way as letters, but the obstacles to learning exist across the curriculum. To learn the content of *any* subject, these students must continually employ the very language skills that challenge them.

**In our schools today, some 10-15 million students—1 out of every 5—have been diagnosed with dyslexia and other Language-based Learning Disabilities.** Significant numbers of others go unrecognized. For the vast majority of them, the neurological pathways that control how they take in, process, store, retrieve, and use language are compromised. As a result, although highly intelligent, they have great difficulty mastering the basic skills required for academic success.

**However, with explicit instruction and reinforcement in these fundamental language and learning skills,**

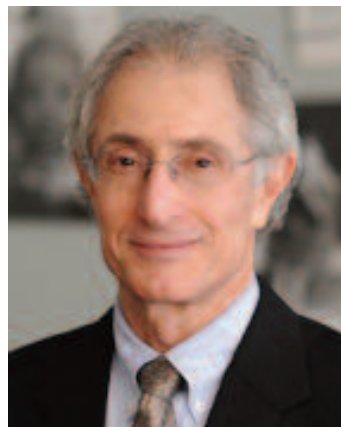
**they can and do achieve in school.** Without such assistance, these students often fall by the wayside. Their talents remain untapped, their potential unrealized, *their futures marked by illiteracy, dead-end employment or dependency, crime and/or addiction.*

**Explicit instruction in language or learning skills often ends after 4th grade in most schools.** From then on, the emphasis is almost exclusively on content, or the “what” of education. In this environment, success relies on memorization, quick recall and proficiency in reading and written expression—the very skills which students with language processing problems lack.

**What's missing for them is the “how.”** By the end of their elementary years and throughout the rest of their academic careers, students with learning disabilities are confronted by oceans of new vocabulary, ideas, and concepts. To understand and use the new information, they must *learn* strategies to process, store, and retrieve the information as well as learn the steps to express what they have learned in oral and written language. To build competency, students also require guided practice where teachers cue and model for students how to employ the strategies to complete assignments. Without

---

ROBERT J. BROUDO



President and  
Headmaster  
Landmark School  
Prides Crossing, MA

these interventions, these often highly intelligent students fall behind and ultimately fail.

With school budgets strained by the rising costs of serving students with special needs, and the increasing demands to meet standardized performance measures, schools need solutions that will both save dollars and boost achievement for this growing population of students.

For students with Language-based Learning Disabilities, there are educational solutions that have been developed that if implemented more widely could rescue millions of children from school failure, *and* as a bonus benefit *all* students as well. Some of these solutions date back to the 1930's having been developed by pioneers such as Samuel Orton, Anna Gillingham, Edith Norrie, and Rita Buchan.

These teaching principles and practices are practical, classroom-tested, and informed by the latest research on human intelligence, cognitive development, and learning disabilities. The goal is for students to be actively engaged in their own education, always learning *how* to learn as well as *what* to learn. As a result, they become critical thinkers, problem solvers, and independent learners.

Language skills (reading, writing, oral expression and mathematics) and learning skills (planning, study and organizational strategies) are the essential building blocks for further learning. Standard subjects such as science, history, and literature present underlying language demands that can be made explicit and addressed directly to ensure knowledge acquisition as well as the ability to communicate what has been learned. Teachers can provide direct instruction and practice in the organizational skills required to study, produce research papers, complete assignments and take tests (e.g., planning, time management, note taking). With time and practice, students eventually internalize the process and follow the steps independently.

Some of these instructional strategies include:

### **1. Practices in Reading**

Multi-sensory systematic language instruction reflects a bottom-up focus, including a part-to-whole sequenced exposure to the units of language and inductive, whole-to-part exercises leading to development of significant word attack skills. Emphasis is placed upon developing phonological awareness and learning sound-symbol correspondence as well as word elements (letters, sounds and symbols) that are combined into words. Structured exercises introduce linguistic/phonetic principles in a hierarchical, cumulative and sequential presentation. The same systematic language approach can be used to teach spelling.

### **2. Practices in Writing**

The writing process can be taught as a series of manageable steps that can be demonstrated and practiced in very concrete ways. The five-step process consists of

brainstorming, organizing, drafting, proofreading and final drafting. Through brainstorming, teachers address the issues of oral rehearsal and immediate feedback on ideas. Emphasis is on group work and discussion as well as visual organizers to play upon the visual strengths of many students. Through organizing, teachers convey graphic and visual techniques, as well as outline various text structures before brainstorming, organizing, drafting, proofreading and writing. Through drafting, students learn how to address the assignment initially and how to follow an outline correctly. Through proofreading, students learn to apply familiar skills and develop metacognitive skills. With the help of mnemonic devices, checklists and cueing questions, students learn to reflect critically on what they have written. The final drafting step requires that students incorporate the revisions from the proofreading step into their final product.

The methodology for teaching writing should emphasize frameworks and scripts. Frameworks are linguistic templates with supports. Teachers find them helpful because they are based on small-step instruction. For example, frameworks for paragraph structures have embedded guides that help students form introductory and concluding sentences. Similarly inset boxes that list transitional words help students combine sentences to make comparison-contrast statements. Scripts are samples of guided classroom discussion. They are embedded throughout the text to model the use of frameworks with expressive language techniques. Whenever possible, linguistic exercises are theme-centered and incorporate real-world vocabulary and concepts.

### **3. Practices in Oral Expression**

Given exposure to language early in life, most children develop intuitions about the structure of language and its components. They develop a metalinguistic awareness that serves as a scaffold for the orderly processing and storage of information that allows for concise, coherent delivery of information as well. Difficulty comprehending and using the underlying structure of language affects a child's ability to process or share information accurately, whether listening to a lecture, reading literature or participating in discussion. Learning specialists have developed strategies for helping students develop an internal scaffolding based on explicit instruction in phonology (speech sounds), morphology (meaningful word parts), syntax (sentence structure), semantics (vocabulary, meaning) and pragmatics (social communication).

### **4. Practices in Mathematics**

While its symbols or "letters" are numbers, mathematics is essentially a language. The key to helping these students is to recognize their mathematical deficiencies as a function of their language processing deficits and to teach them accordingly. Teaching methods that rely less on auditory and more on visual processing to minimize the language demands can help students grasp mathematical principles and concepts. Contrary to con-

ventional teaching practice, students with language processing problems need to move from “whole” to “part,” rather than from part to whole, to make sense of the information and in order store and retrieve it accurately.

### **5. Practices in Study Skills**

Teachers can provide direct, systematic instruction in the study skills required for organizing, learning, and mastering information. Some of these skills include: a Master Notebook System (a standard system for organizing notes, handouts, corrected tests, homework assignments and other materials); instruction in how to recognize and formulate main ideas (a foundation for mastering the remaining study skills); instruction in note-taking (very effective is a two-column system which enables students to sort information by main idea and details); instruction in summarizing and paraphrasing; textbook skills (strategies for reading for meaning, organizational strategies to structure information for easier recall and mastery strategies to move information

into long-term memory); instruction in how to study and achieve mastery of material (via use of the Master Notebook System); instruction test preparation and test-taking skills.

### **Conclusion**

Instructional methods, as discussed above, are the result of decades of development and refinement in the classroom coupled with insights from the evolving fields of neuroscience and cognitive research. These best practices for students with learning disabilities offer all schools, teachers, and students practical methods that can build skills and increase learning and mastery for millions of students in this country who are now failing, as well as for all students.

Investing in the implementation of these models is not only one of our best hopes for breaking the cycle of school failure, juvenile delinquency and long-term dependency; it will level the academic playing field and help to create independent learners at all levels.

