ADVANCING COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION BETWEEN MULTILINGUAL AND SPECIAL EDUCATION DEPARTMENTS: A WEB-BASED MODEL TO SERVE DUAL ELIGIBLE STUDENTS

by

Stacy Jane Severson

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Hamline University

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Capstone Project Facilitator: Laura Halldin
Content Expert: Kate McNulty
Research Question

The question that guided my research was: *How can communication between ESL teachers and special education staff be improved to better serve dual eligible students?*

Project Summary

English as a second language (ESL) and special education, are two stand-alone departments in most if not all school districts. These two departments merge when a student qualifies for both services. In the state of Minnesota, these students are called Dual Eligible. As of 2016, Minnesota Department of Education’s Report on English Learner Education in Minnesota (2017b) states that 8,624, or 11.9% of the identified English learners in the state qualify for both EL (English learner) and special education services. This bears relevance to possible language characteristics that occur because of a disability; they can be seen in both a learner’s first or native language, but also in any subsequent languages he or she learns. Where this gets complicated is that in studying to become an ESL teacher, only the second language of a typically developing child was considered, and when I studied delayed and disordered language acquisition, my first degree, only first language acquisition was considered. There are indeed few persons in education who have both special education and ESL licenses.

In order to answer my research question, I chose to design a website as my culminating project. I decided upon this for several reasons. A website can be a powerful communication tool, and a unique way to connect to a particular community, namely ESL (English as a second language) teachers. I thought initially about creating a
presentation, but then opted for having a place where readers could revisit at their convenience, with questions, comments and their own stories upon different student needs. I envisioned a living document that can be edited and updated as interest, theories, research, and interventions arise and change over time. With a clear audience in mind, I created a site where ESL teachers can go to learn about language characteristics they might see in dual eligible students, such as echolalia in a student with autism.

Upon the recommendation of a web designer friend, I decided upon using WordPress.com as my website builder. The set-up process seemed fairly self-explanatory and not too complicated for a novice to use, plus it allowed me to use the domain name I purchased, dual-eligible-students.com. I needed a domain name that ESL teachers would remember and wouldn’t be overly complex.

I used three guidelines for formatting my website, the first being Research-Based Web Design and Usability Guidelines, which provides guidance for increasing website usability and describes best practices with respect to designing a website for ease of navigation and optimizing the user experience. Web Accessibility essentials was an online course required by my school district for anyone working with web design. It teaches about equitable access and removing barriers that prevent interaction with or access to websites by people with disabilities. Accessible websites have multiple sensory channels and allow for multiple navigational tools. Six Criteria for Websites are just that, criteria to deal with content as opposed to graphics or design of a website: authority, purpose, coverage, currency, objectivity, and accuracy.
The Project

The website can be found at [https://dual-eligible-students.com](https://dual-eligible-students.com). The four main drop-down menus reflect the four domains of language used to organize language learning: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Each domain has an initial page describing the particular skill and how it might relate to an English learner or a child with a disability / disabilities. There are also useful links and apps that might assist a dual eligible student in developing that skill.

Each domain is further broken down by language characteristics that can be seen in the native language of a person with that particular disability. So a search on Down syndrome will come up with four hits, one for each language domain.
Within each language characteristic, such as echolalia, there is a description of the feature. Other information that can be seen on the page is: reasons for occurrence, interventions, links to expert websites, YouTube videos related to the language feature, articles of note, or apps that might be relevant for learning the domain, such as reading, in a child with that particular language feature.

**Autism Spectrum Disorder**

It is well-documented that many students with autism struggle with writing. Broun (2009) writes that many children with ASD wrestle physically with fine motor skills and visual-motor speed which can take their toll on handwriting and word processing. In addition, the cognitive aspect can also be a challenge. In order to be a good writer, one must be able to organize thoughts and navigate through finding the best way to create a message. Writing requires flexibility, and people with ASD are frequently rigid in thoughts and actions. Temple Grandin (2006) notes the importance of visualization to persons with ASD: that they frequently think in pictures, and therefore the use of visual supports/scaffolds and graphic organizers may be of benefit.

The Art of Autism has a webpage on teaching a child with autism how to write. Sasha from The Autism Helper has a video on YouTube about setting up a writing center in an Autism classroom. And finally, TTAC Online, a community sharing resources to educate students with disabilities, provides an article titled, “Differentiated Writing Instruction for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders.”


References


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