Teaching and testing students with SpLDs: Experience from the Venice University Language Centre

1. Introduction

In Italy, students with disabilities have been integrated into mainstream education for decades. In recent years, detailed national guidelines have been set out regarding learning and assessment for students who are medically certified with specific learning disabilities (SpLDs) to guarantee their access to all levels of education. The guidelines are mostly intended for students in secondary school, although they are also applicable to university education, and represent an important step forward in providing support for students with these difficulties. However, there is no recognition of the difference in learning and assessment procedures in the two educational contexts. The guidelines thus remain a generic indication for teachers and testers in universities, who are often forced to seek solution on an *ad hoc* basis.

This article reports on the procedures followed to draw up an in-house protocol applied to the learning and assessment of the English language proficiency of students enrolled at the Venice University Language Centre (ULC) who are certified with dyslexia and related SpLDs. We begin with a brief definition of these SpLDs and the implications they have for the learning of English as a second or foreign language for Italian students. We review the legislative background in Italy to identify the provisions set out for students with SpLDs. We then describe the context of the University of Venice Language Centre and the policies applied to students with SpLDs.

In the second part of the paper, we focus on the case studies of two students with SpLDs enrolled in English language courses at the Venice ULC. In particular, we report on the manner in which access to the courses was managed and the difficulties encountered by teachers and students alike in the classroom. We also give details on how the testing was arranged: the accommodations and modifications applied. We conclude with a reflection on the outcomes attained by the students, and the need to consider individual cases of students with SpLDs *ad personam*, but not *ad hoc*, so as to guarantee both fair access to foreign language learning and valid testing of their abilities.

2. Dyslexia, related SpLDs, and foreign language processing

It is beyond the scope of this article to put forward a detailed definition of dyslexia and related learning difficulties. However, a review of the main features of dyslexia identified in the literature may help in terms of a better understanding of the difficulties dyslexics face in processing language.

Firstly, dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent wording, reading and spelling. Slow or inaccurate word-recognition stems from difficulties in matching phonemes to graphemes; spelling is also problematic (Kormos and Smith 2012, 30-31).

Secondly, dyslexia often brings with it difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed. People with dyslexia often process orally presented information more slowly and less accurately, and have difficulties in retaining spoken information within their short-term memory systems (ibid.).

Thirdly, dyslexia is neurobiological in origin and is not related to measured IQ, occurring across a wide range of intellectual abilities. Dyslexia is often diagnosed when a person has more difficulty with reading, writing, and spelling skills than their thinking and reasoning abilities would predict. This is known as the psychometric *discrepancy model* of dyslexia, i.e. the idea that dyslexia is identified by a discrepancy between reading attainment and a measure of ability or potential (see British Psychological Society 1999). In typical readers, cognition and reading/spelling develop together while in dyslexic readers they appear to develop differently (Gabrieli 2009).

Fourthly, dyslexia is not a distinct category with clear cut-off points, but is often a series of related difficulties in multiple cognitive and academic areas. It is therefore usually conceived as on a continuum ranging from mild to severe difficulties (Payne and Turner 1999).

Some of the difficulties that are commonly related to dyslexia are:

- dysgraphia (difficulties with writing),
- dysorthographia (difficulties with spelling and grammar),
- dysnomia (difficulties recalling words or names).

In addition to these linguistic difficulties, there are also some common cognitive problems connected with dyslexia that are often exhibited. These may include:

- dyscalculia (difficulties in acquiring arithmetical skills),
- dyspraxia (difficulties in motor coordination),
- short-term memory deficit (shorter working memory span),

- attention deficit disorder (ADD), often associated with hyperactivity (ADHD).

Dyslexics may have problems when reading and listening to longer oral or written texts as they have trouble in retaining information in their working memory. At the same time, a limited attention span adds fatigue to learning, which requires repeated input of new information. Difficulties with attention deficit can also lead to problems in managing time and personal organization, which can impact severely on classroom learning (Kormos and Smith 2012, 32-33).

SpLDs often occur simultaneously, and they also occur in varying degrees of severity. Such multiple diagnoses are known by the term "comorbidity", which can reflect an inability to supply a single diagnosis that accounts for all symptoms. It is therefore very important to have as detailed as possible individual linguistic and cognitive diagnosis, as each person has a different degree of overlapping symptoms (see Ferrer, Shaywitz, Holahan, Marchione and Shaywitz (2010) and Lyon, Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2003) for further information on defining dyslexia and related SpLDs).

Research indicates that a person's native language learning facility affects their potential for learning a foreign language. There appears to be similar development in spelling and reading profiles in the first language and in the second language, even though different levels of proficiency are reached in both languages. Hence students with dyslexia–who have difficulties with phonology and orthography, and syntax–frequently struggle when learning foreign languages. In addition, foreign language learning may bring with it the attendant problems of lack of motivation and high anxiety (see Sparks and Ganschow 1991, and Sparks, Ganschow and Patton 2008).

Moreover, the occurrence of dyslexia would seem to differ among languages. Dyslexia is common in languages with writing systems with irregular correspondence between sounds and letters (deep orthographies). It is less common in languages with writing systems in which sounds and letters map more consistently (transparent orthographies) (Lindgren 2012, 19). English has a highly inconsistent match between the 26 graphemes and the 44 phonemes of its sound and writing systems. Indeed, according to the British Dyslexia Association, it is estimated that 10% of the British population are dyslexic. Italian, on the other hand, has a close match between letters and sounds, and Italy has much lower numbers of dyslexics, approximately 4 to 5% of the population (Associazione Trelle et al. 2011; Lindgren 2012; Lindgren, De Renzi, Richman 1985). Thus, if we take into consideration the contrast in orthographies between the two languages, the learning of English for Italian dyslexic students is additionally problematic.

This brief outline of potential language problems for dyslexics highlights how the process of second language acquisition brings with it an additional load for learners with dyslexia and related SpLDs. The structural differences between Italian and English also bring further difficulties into play. We now turn to the Italian context and the legislative provisions made for students with SpLDs within the Italian education system.

3. The Italian context

Specific legislation on SpLDs has been produced in Italy only in the last decade. Even though students with SpDLs represent around 4 to 5% of the Italian school population, in the early 2000s legislation was limited to local regulations, regional laws and ministerial guidelines. Before 2010, there was no national law providing a general overview of SpLDs and indications to cover all educational levels. Recognition of students with SpLDs, the adoption of learning and teaching strategies to meet their needs, and the use of compensatory instruments and technologies were applied according to local legislation with differences between regional educational contexts. Best practices were thus not shared in a national perspective, but limited to a small number of teachers and education professionals.

Specific learning difficulties were fully recognised by Law 170/2010. The key points of this law are early diagnosis and certification, teaching and learning flexibility, and the introduction of compensatory measures or exemptions. The law defines dyslexia, dysgraphia, dysorthographia, and dyscalculia as specific learning difficulties and sanctions the right to education for students with these learning difficulties. It sets down the need for an official medical diagnosis and certification of cases of SpLDs. Once official diagnosis has been obtained, students may obtain an individual educational plan (PEI, or *Piano Educativo Individualizzato*).

Individual educational plans are a combination of what is called individual learning (*didattica individualizzata*) and personalized learning (*didattica personalizzata*). Individual learning refers to the student's individual activities and method of study to develop and improve weaker skills and competences. Personalised learning concerns the use of different teaching methodologies and strategies in order to meet the student's needs and promote their potential. However, individual educational plans refer only to the school context, and the law makes no similar provisions for university education.

Conversely, the compensatory measures or exemptions established by law can be applied at all levels of education. Legislation indicates that they may be used not only in the classroom but also during examinations. University courses are for the first time included in the analysis and investigation of students with SpLDs, and the indications provided by the law must also be applied to entrance tests and curricular examinations at university level. Decree no. 5669/11 implements law no. 170/10 by focusing on new educational and assessment methodologies and on the training of support teachers. Specific guidelines are included in the decree to provide recommendations, suggestions and instructions springing from most recent studies on SpLDs. The guidelines basically stipulate two kinds of provisions: compensatory measures and exemptions.

The decree and guidelines contemplate the use of educational and technological compensatory instruments to facilitate study, such as:
- tables or mind maps,
- voice synthesizers to convert language text into speech,
- recorders instead of note-taking,
- PC word processors with spelling and grammar checks,
- calculators.

Exemptions refer to
- exoneration from activities students with SpLDs find particularly hard to perform such as written tasks, which can be replaced by oral activities,
- up to 30% extra time allotment during tests,
- reduction of the curricular programme to be studied.

Only in the case of serious SpLD diagnosis can students be exempted from written examinations and given an oral interview instead.

Further legislation has provided additional guidelines with specific reference to the teaching and testing of foreign languages (DM 12/07/2011: the 'Legge Gelmini'). Recommendations are provided as to criteria to use for assessment. In relation to receptive skills (reading and listening) the legislation suggests that teachers and testers should focus on general understanding rather than on accuracy and detailed comprehension. As far as productive skills are concerned, teachers are invited to apply the same principles and evaluate communicative effectiveness. Task achievement is of the utmost importance; however, it is suggested that, when assessing students with dyslexia and SpLDs, grammar range and accuracy together with the use of a wide range of lexical resources are not to be considered as essential features.

The legislation also provides for the use of technological compensatory instruments in testing settings. These include voice synthesizers to assist reading skills, and PC word processors with spelling and grammar checks and online dictionaries to assist writing skills. What instruments are used in examinations is at the discretion of the examining commission.

Exemptions are represented by a reduction in the curricular programme and, in the case of certified severe SpLDs, students might be exonerated from written assessment and be provided with equivalent oral assessment. Exemption from all forms of written assessment of a foreign language was initially permitted, but this measure was modified in later legislation. It is now recommended that dyslexic students be given additional time for written exams in foreign language state exams rather than exemption to ensure the legal validity of the final diploma.

Recent Italian legislation therefore pays specific attention to the learning and assessment of the foreign language skills of students with dyslexia and SpLDs in the education system, providing guidelines for assessment criteria and compensatory and exemptive measures. The critical aspect of the legislation is the discretional choice of compensatory measures and exemptions. In the secondary school context, teachers may observe the performance of students over a period of time following the guidelines of their individual learning plans, and make informed decisions about their application. However, at university level, students work in relative isolation, and co-ordination between individual teachers and the disabilities offices is at best tenuous. This makes decisions regarding what measures to apply problematic. We return to this issue below.

4. The context of the Venice ULC

The Venice University Language Centre provides courses in English, French, German, Italian for foreigners, Spanish, and Russian. The courses are open to university students as well as external students, and are organized following the university terms; however intensive or semi-intensive options are also available. The general teaching method adopted is the communicative approach applied through the functional method in multimedia classrooms. The courses therefore do not substitute official university teaching, but develop communicative skills. Access to the courses is provided through a computerized adaptive placement test. Exit tests to all courses are also computer delivered and include written and oral components.

The importance of the courses offered at the ULC has increased considerably in recent years as recognition of the end-of-course certification has been increasingly recognised within students' academic careers. Certificates issued by the ULC are used to provide evidence of the CEFR B1 level of English proficiency required for students enrolling at Italian universities and of the CEFR B2 level of English proficiency required for students completing their undergraduate degrees. ULC certificates are also used for access to ERASMUS student exchange programmes. Much higher stakes are therefore now involved in the need to provide fair and valid tests for language courses.

For students who do not hold certification of language proficiency from international certification boards, Venice ULC has also developed in-house computer-based tests to permit students to meet these new mandatory language requirements. In this context, test administrators at the Venice ULC have over the past five years worked towards a policy of inclusion, while applying the measures available under Italian law. They attempt to avoid exemptions or alternative forms of testing for students with disabilities, even though the law allows students to request these measures. Deaf students are exonerated from the listening test, otherwise a variety of compensatory measures are

applied to enable students with disabilities fair access to the test. Visually-impaired students, for example, are allowed screen magnification or enlarged font and bigger line spacing, or read-aloud accommodations in which a reader reads the test. The measures to be applied to students with dyslexia and related SpLDs are given careful consideration, and are generally decided on a case-by-case basis. As a general rule, these students are given 25% extra time to complete the test; in addition, students who request it are permitted the use of a voice synthesizer.

The aim of providing fair access to language tests in the context of the delivery of the B1/B2 English tests to students with dyslexia and SpLDs has involved consultation with language teachers, test administrators and representatives of the university disabilities office (see D'Este and Ludbrook 2013). The experience acquired has provided an invaluable basis to the issue that will be discussed in the section below: developing a protocol setting out best practices in providing fair access to language learning and valid assessment for students with SpLDs enrolling at general foreign language courses at the Venice ULC.

5. Access protocol and learning agreement

To meet the needs of the growing numbers of students with SpLDs enrolling in higher education, most universities have established some provisions for supporting the learning needs of students with SpLDs. The services include assistance from personal tutors and the provision of adaptive technologies to facilitate learning and assessment. Most universities now have specific offices with trained staff to assist students with disabilities in their university studies and provide co-ordination with teachers regarding access to examinations. However, as already stated, there is often a lack of clarity about the nature of this support, including who should provide it, what should be covered, how it can be funded, and where and in what form it should be delivered.

The Venice ULC, as part of the University of Venice, is committed to offering an inclusive language study programme to ensure the best possible progress for all students, whatever their needs and abilities. In the absence of specific institutional definitions of inclusion policies and procedures regarding the ULC non-curricular language courses, the ULC aims have been to provide a continuum of special education services in the University context by drafting an access protocol according to national laws and regulations.

The access protocol is the outcome of the ULC student-centred approach and of the interplay between administrative and teaching staff in order to identify the students' needs and provide a detailed and, whenever possible, personalized set of special accommodations.

The protocol is made up of five key phases:

1. an initial evaluation meeting,
2. definition of possible special accommodations and compensatory instruments,
3. definition and/or creation of personalized learning material,
4. definition of possible exemptions,
5. drawing up the learning agreement.

The initial evaluation meeting consists in collecting priority data about the student which will be taken into account when making decisions about the student's foreign language study programme. Firstly, it is necessary to obtain the student's medical diagnosis in order to gather all possible information regarding the nature and the degree of their learning difficulties. If the student is already enrolled in a university course, such documentation is provided by the university's Disability Office. Together with the medical diagnosis, the student's learning profile is also supplied. The learning profile is crucial as it is the main evidence of the student's progress in their university (or school) study programme, of their current level of educational proficiency, and of personally tailored strategies and actions that have already been applied to support their study. The learning profile is an essential starting point to focus on what has worked (or not) for the student in the past, because all new support actions must take into account strategies and accommodations which past experiences have shown to be effective or ineffective to avoid wasting time and resources.

Another important aspect of the initial evaluation phase is the analysis of the kind of language course the student wants to attend, how it is delivered, and related assessment methods. The standard ULC language courses are 50-hour classroom courses integrated by 10 hours of self-study in the ULC multimedia language laboratory or on the ULC interactive language learning website. All standard courses end with a final computerized test, a written task and an oral interview. The ULC also offers 30-hour courses (modules) focussing on specific language skills without final assessment. The student's choice of attending a standard course or a specific language module is a decisive factor, as it can bring in different problems and reflections. Standard courses require greater time and study commitment than modules. In addition, students attending modules are not required to sit a final test.

All information gathered in the initial phase is essential to determine a list of possible special accommodations and compensatory instruments. According to their profiles and diagnoses, students with SpLDs are allowed to use educational and technological instruments or to be given extra time while doing specific language tasks, or possibly might be exempted from them.

A meeting is then organised between the student and the course teacher in order to discuss the possibility of drawing up an Individual Educational Plan if the student explicitly requests accommodations, adjustments and exemptions as defined by national legislation. During the meeting, preliminary support actions are defined to

concentrate on the student's individual learning style, and on their expressed evolving needs and learning priorities. After listening to the student and gaining awareness of their learning needs, the teacher is then able to introduce tailored strategies, and make every possible effort to include them in the classroom context in the most appropriate manner. Further meetings may also be held during the course to verify the learning process and arrange the production of personalised learning materials. Examples of such materials are written or reading exercises with modified tasks, conceptual maps to be used for self-study, and computer-based exercises. Taking into account the student's SpLDs and previous measures the student has been used to working with, during the meeting the teacher is also in the position to decide whether the student can be allowed compensatory measures or to be exempted from particular types of tasks both in classroom activities and in the final assessment.

The natural outcome of the previous phases is the drawing up of a learning agreement. The main aim of the agreement is to define the roles of the student and the teacher, as they are both involved as active players in the learning process. Building a shared responsibility is of the utmost importance to fostering the student's motivation and empowering them by giving them control of their language learning. From this perspective, the agreement becomes a bilaterally recognised tool to define the best learning conditions that can be offered to the student to achieve their goals. It starts from the re-definition of the student's learning objectives in the light of their learner profile and the identification of all the forms of support that the ULC is able to provide. It also outlines the student's special assessment accommodations as indicated in national guidelines. Finally, the learning agreement promotes the co-operative approach as a potential means to raise the learner's expectations, seek their views and develop their independence by trying to set challenging and appropriate targets in response to their profile.

6. Two case studies

In this section we will report on the cases of two students with certified SpLDs who enrolled in standard language courses to illustrate the procedures implemented at the Venice ULC. As specified above, the standard language courses have 50 hours of classroom time and a further 10 hours of self-study in the multimedia language laboratory, with a final computer-delivered exit test.

The first participant, Tommaso, was a 21-year-old university student studying architecture. His medical certification diagnosed moderate to severe dyslexia, and mild dysgraphia and dysorthographia. The documentation recommended the use of technological devices such as a voice synthesizer, a word processor with a spell-check function, an electronic dictionary, and the possibility of recording lectures. As far as assessment was concerned, the documentation suggested the student be given extra time in written tasks and that assessments should be divided into shorter sessions to be delivered separately. With specific reference to English language assessment, the documentation recommended that oral assessment should be the main form to be used, together with the non-evaluation of possible spelling mistakes.

In spite of the recommendations of his medical certification, Tommaso chose to take the standard online placement test to enroll in ULC language courses. He wrote to introduce himself to the Centre and to disclose his learning difficulties only after he had been placed in an English course and he had enrolled at the Centre. His entry test result placed him at a CEFR A1.2 level.

Despite late disclosure of his special needs, Tommaso agreed to meet the course teacher to discuss his case. He clearly stated that his objective was to achieve a B1 level of English language proficiency, which he needed to meet the language requirements of his university. Tommaso, however, fully recognized his lower level of language competence. In the initial evaluation meeting, he revealed that he had never used voice synthesis before enrolling at the ULC, but that he was interested in taking advantage of the opportunity to use it in this context. He appeared to be a willing and active participant in his language learning programme.

The second participant, Giovanni, aged 19, had just completed secondary high school. His diagnosis was of moderate dyslexia with related dysgraphia and dyscalculia. He contacted the ULC before placement and enrollment, requesting special assessment accommodations. His medical certification made the same recommendations as that of Tommaso: the use of technological educational devices, extra time and division of assessment tests. Giovanni disclosed his special needs early in the enrollment process and did not do the online placement test, choosing instead to take an equivalent oral placement test. After the test he enrolled in an English course at the CEFR B1.1 level.

Giovanni appeared to be less motivated than Tommaso. He was not enrolled in a university undergraduate course, and so had no immediate need for certification of his language proficiency, although it would be useful for future employment. He met the course teacher to discuss his case, but he did not demonstrate particular interest in collaborating to identify his real needs. Like Tommaso, Giovanni had no previous experience with voice synthesis. However, he showed little interest in familiarizing himself with this technology, which is available for students through the ULC language laboratory.

6.1 Teaching

After the initial meetings, both students and their teachers drew up learning agreements in order to counterbalance possible difficulties in the learning process. It was agreed that both students would:

- record their lessons instead of taking notes,

- complete written exercises done in class at home and then hand them in to teachers by e-mail,
- not be obliged to speak in public during the classroom lessons,
- meet regularly with the teacher to verify improvements and difficulties that might emerge during the course,
- be allowed to take breaks and leave the classroom during lessons to rest.

Shortly after the start of both courses, the presence of the students in the classes (whose special needs had not been disclosed by the teachers) raised issues regarding the classroom dynamics. The teachers independently reported that both students had problems in replying to direct questions not only from the teacher but also from classmates. They were also reluctant to do pairwork and to complete written exercises even at home. In addition, they were often inattentive and easily distracted, which the teachers felt sure was due to fatigue. These behavioural patterns were considered to be disruptive to the classes and were creating discontent amongst the other students.

The teachers had extensive experience in teaching English as a foreign language. They had received initial preparation regarding the learning difficulties involved in students with dyslexia. They were given additional awareness training of the problems of short-term memory deficit and attention deficit disorder, which are often related to dyslexia and can also lead to problems in time management and personal organization.

With this greater understanding of SpLDs, the teachers reviewed the teaching procedures adopted not only with the two students, but with the class as a whole. They introduced strategies to provide better scaffolding: they set more specific targets in written tasks for all the learners to work towards, and they also developed differentiated teaching material to present information in varied formats. Conceptual maps and multisensory material were introduced for all students during the lessons, promoting an inclusive classroom setting.

In addition to these generalized modifications, the teachers also developed special written tasks for the two students, and the teachers made sure they were given additional time when asked to do individual reading tasks. Both students were encouraged to access the online ULC language resources and to use the language laboratory to familiarise themselves with the general content and vocabulary of their lessons through exercises available there in an accessible layout with large clear fonts, and a small number of exercises per page, often accompanied by visual supports.

Although the two students had similar medical diagnoses of their SpLDs, and similar accommodations were agreed on, the teachers reported that the two students behaved very differently during the course. Tommaso attended regularly and participated actively in the lessons, completing the written tasks assigned. The teacher described Tommaso as a motivated student, but also stated he was not very talkative during the lessons, which she felt might be caused by his dyslexia-related problems or shyness, or a combination of both factors. As a consequence, it was very hard for him to socialize with other students in the class. He did not book any further appointments to speak to the teacher during the course, but he did start using online materials in the language laboratory and learned to use the voice synthesizer software available at the ULC. He also installed and began using the same software on his personal computer.

Giovanni, on the other hand, seemed less motivated and more absent-minded right from the start of the course. The teacher stated he was very often late for lessons or used to leave before the end of the lesson. Like Tommaso, he was not talkative, did not socialize with his classmates, and did not book any further appointments with the teacher. However, Giovanni was not very active with written class work, even when given adapted written tasks, and as far as homework was concerned, he rarely completed the tasks assigned.

The ULC procedure combined equipping experienced teachers with further training in the special educational needs of students with SpLDs, and modified classroom instruction providing students with slower introduction of new material, highly structured classes, and substantial repetition and review. This approach has been shown to lead to success in the acquisition of foreign languages by university students with SpLDs at a level comparable to their peers in regular foreign language classes (see Downey, Snyder and Hall 2000).

6.2 Testing

The end-of-course tests were discussed with the two students in the initial evaluation meeting with the teachers in order to provide the adjustments/accommodations as indicated by national guidelines. The importance of clarity in the objectives of coursework assignments was recognised as the first step to define the final assessment format, administration and, only if unavoidable, modification in content.

The final UCL standard course exam consists of three tests: a computer-based test assessing grammar and vocabulary, and reading and listening skills; a written task; and an oral interview to verify speaking and communicative skills. The computer test is administered in a computer laboratory through an e-learning platform (Moodle). It consists of multiple choice, true/false questions or gap-fill tasks.

The computer delivery of the test means that the layout can easily be modified, fonts can be changed, enlarged and spaced. Voice synthesis can also be used, with the possibility of choosing different voices and reading speeds. The test is delivered online, so students can be given access to electronic dictionaries and spell-check functions while they are taking the test. The time allotted to the test is set automatically, but can be programmed to provide extra time.

Written tasks differ according to the language level. However, at the lower levels of the CEFR, they are usually short texts with open-answer questions. The oral interview tests the student's ability to take part in a conversation using questions or pictures as prompts. It is taken paired with another student to allow interactive skills to be assessed.

According to the teachers' reports, the two students made different choices when deciding on accommodations during the drawing up of the learning agreement. Following the national guidelines, the students were offered the accommodations available under Italian law. In addition, they were offered the possibility to sit an equivalent oral test instead of the standard computer test.

Tommaso sat the standard computer test with extra time and use of the voice synthesizer and electronic dictionary. He chose to sit the standard writing and speaking tasks, including the paired speaking test. His results showed that although he was weak on the computer test (59%), he did well during the oral interview and in the writing task. He passed the overall final test and was awarded an A1.2 level certificate.

Giovanni also sat the standard computerized test with extra time. He did not request voice synthesis because of his unfamiliarity with it. He asked to use a monolingual dictionary during the test; he chose to complete a special writing task at home; and he also chose to take the standard oral interview with a partner. His test results showed that he performed well on the speaking part of the test, but he did not reach a pass level on the section delivered via computer (grammar and vocabulary, and reading and listening skills). The course teacher examined his test results and interpreted the results avoiding giving importance to spelling errors and some vocabulary mistakes. Nevertheless, the overall test result was far below an acceptable level to pass the course and be awarded the final certificate.

7. Reflections

The two case studies reported here very clearly highlight the difficulties involved for administrative and teaching staff when attempting to apply the accommodations for students with SpLDs set out under Italian law. The Venice ULC has developed a protocol involving a series of measures to be applied in the case of such students enrolling in non-undergraduate language courses so as to provide these students with fair and effective access to language learning and testing: pre-course meetings with the teachers to identify the students' individual needs and to agree on appropriate ways of organizing both classroom lessons and individual study; the use of technological support, where requested; and the application of suitable accommodations for final assessment. In addition, language teachers are given training in awareness of how comorbid symptoms can be present in students with SpLDs, and are also provided with support and assistance for individual cases.

Nevertheless, the two students in this study showed very different behaviour patterns, despite their similar SpLD profiles and the comparable procedures followed to include them in the classroom and testing contexts, which were determined on the basis of consultation with the students and on careful observation of their needs as they emerged during the course. They also showed different outcomes in their test results.

Consultation with the teachers and the administrators assisting them reveals that it is extremely difficult to identify the causes of these differences. On the one hand, one of these candidates had clear short-term goals for his language learning (obtaining the language certification required by his university) whereas the second student seemed from the start to be less focused as to what his expectations were of the language course. Personal motivation may therefore have played an essential role in determining what language level the students reached through the course, and the manner in which it was achieved. On the other hand, it is widely reported in the literature how difficulties related to dyslexia, such as attention deficit, can make classroom learning extremely difficult for students with SpLDs. Lack of concentration and non-involvement in the classroom context may therefore be attributable to these medical issues rather than to personal attitudes.

The Venice ULC addresses the issues of fair access to foreign language learning and valid testing of students with SpLDs in various ways: training and awareness-raising of language teachers, the development of an access protocol that actively involves students in decisions regarding the measures adopted to assist their language learning, and the careful application of test modifications and technological assistance to best serve these students' individual needs. The process of acquiring information and experience that can contribute to improving the support given to students with SpLDs is an ongoing one. Further investigation will continue to guarantee a principled application of Italian law that also takes into consideration the needs of individual students.

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