Dialog on Language Instruction

Faculty Forum

Maximizing the Effectiveness of Special Assistance: Insights from Student Perspectives and Classroom Practice

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The Special Assistance (SA) program serves as a critical intervention at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC), as it provides targeted academic support for at-risk students. While the program can provide many benefits, it can also be challenging to manage at a school level and hard to know what students expect and appreciate. This Faculty Forum article reports on students' perceptions of what they consider to be effective SA sessions. Student survey responses, sensing session feedback, and qualitative reflections reveal that students perceive SA hours as most valuable when instruction is tailored, strategy-rich, and delivered within a supportive environment. Conversely, SA sessions are perceived as least effective when they replicate classroom tasks or are framed as a punitive measure. The article concludes with recommendations for maximizing the impact of the SA program within the Undergraduate Russian School (URU) and DLIFLC. By aligning SA practices with both theory and student experience, faculty can increase learners' confidence, reduce attrition, and improve outcomes on high-stakes assessments such as the Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT). Additionally, implications are discussed with an emphasis on practical strategies instructors can readily apply.

Keywords: *Special Assistance, Differentiated Instruction, Learner Autonomy, Strategy Training, Growth Mindset, Student-Centered Learning, Motivation, Faculty Development*

INTRODUCTION

The Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) represents one of the most demanding language-learning environments. In the Russian Basic Program, learners are expected to progress from little or no proficiency to Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) level 2 (i.e.,

"limited working proficiency") or higher in listening and reading within 48 weeks. Such intensity creates both opportunities and challenges: while many students thrive, others struggle with pace, cognitive load, and performance pressure.

Students placed in required SA hours receive targeted academic support for their specific needs. Unlike optional tutoring, participation in SA sessions is typically assigned based on academic performance indicators, Early Intervention Board (EIB) findings, or instructor recommendations. Despite its central role, SA is sometimes perceived by faculty and students as a remedial add-on rather than an integrated instructional opportunity. This perception raises an important pedagogical consideration: how can SA sessions be structured in ways that promote learner agency, engagement, and ownership – core elements of student-centered learning?

BACKGROUND

Special Assistance (SA) has been periodically discussed within DLIFLC professional forums and internal conferences. These institutional discussions have explored persistent questions regarding the purpose and framing of SA within intensive language programs. In particular, contributors have examined tensions between remediation-oriented and enrichment-oriented models of SA.

A remediation-oriented approach typically conceptualizes SA as corrective support designed to address academic deficiencies or reteach missed material. While such support may be necessary in certain contexts, institutional reflections suggest that when SA is framed primarily as remediation, students may associate participation with deficit labeling, stigma, or punishment. In contrast, an enrichment-oriented model positions SA as targeted performance enhancement — focusing on strategy refinement, skill sharpening, and confidence building. Prior DLIFLC discussions have suggested that enrichment framing is more likely to promote learner engagement, ownership, and reduced anxiety.

Building on these institutional conversations, three well-established principles in language teaching and learning directly align with the goals of the SA program and the likely needs of students in high-intensity environments:

1. differentiated instruction and tailored support;
2. student-centered learning and strategy training; and
3. psychologically safe learning environments.

Differentiated Instruction and Tailored Support

Differentiated instruction is defined as adapting content, process, and product to meet learners' diverse needs (Tomlinson, 2014). Research confirms that targeted interventions improve retention and engagement in high-intensity programs (Hall, Strangman, & Meyer, 2019).

At the same time, differentiated instruction presents practical challenges. Instructors must balance personalization with pacing guides, standardized curricula, and high-stakes assessment preparation. Planning differentiated tasks can increase preparation time and require substantial pedagogical expertise (Tomlinson, 2014). Moreover, some learners may initially perceive differentiation as singling them out or reinforcing a deficit identity if instructional framing is not handled carefully (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Wentzel, 2012). These tensions are particularly relevant in SA contexts, where students are often assigned participation based on performance indicators.

Student-Centered Learning and Strategy Training

Student-centered approaches place learners at the core of decision-making. Weimer (2013) argues that student-centered instruction promotes deeper engagement and independence, critical factors in sustaining learning beyond the classroom. One common pedagogical approach within student-centered learning is strategy training, which helps students develop tools for learning and test-taking. Research in applied linguistics emphasizes that strategy instruction improves performance on high-stakes assessments (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 2017). Zimmerman (2002) identifies strategy use as central to self-regulated learning, particularly in environments where learners must process large volumes of information under time pressure. Goal-setting further supports this process by helping students identify specific problem areas and actionable steps for improvement.

However, strategy training also presents challenges. Learners may apply strategies mechanically without reflection, resist unfamiliar approaches, or struggle to transfer strategies across tasks (Oxford, 2017). Instructors must decide which strategies to prioritize and how to integrate them without displacing essential content coverage. Nevertheless, research consistently suggests that students value strategy instruction when its relevance to performance is transparent and when opportunities for guided practice and reflection are embedded (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Hattie & Clarke, 2019).

Safe Learning Environments and Affective Filters

Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis remains highly relevant in intensive language-learning contexts, emphasizing that emotional variables — including anxiety, self-confidence, and motivation — influence learners' ability to process and retain language input. When students experience elevated stress or fear of failure, cognitive resources may be diverted away from comprehension, strategy use, and long-term retention.

Contemporary research further supports this relationship between affect and learning. Studies in educational psychology and second language acquisition highlight that psychological safety, perceived instructor support, and growth-oriented feedback significantly influence learner engagement, persistence, and performance (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2020). In high-stakes academic environments, supportive instructional climates are associated with improved self-efficacy, reduced avoidance behaviors, and greater willingness to take learning risks. Students' feelings of belonging and support for their learning autonomy, as well as their

perceptions of high-quality feedback, are key for sustaining motivation (Wentzel, 2012; Hattie & Clarke, 2019).

While institutional discussions provide conceptual grounding, direct student perspectives offer important insight into how SA program functions in practice. The following section reports on qualities that students at DLIFLC value when they attend SA hours.

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CONSTRUCTIVE SA HOURS

Upon DLIFLC Human Research Protections Program's approval in February 2025, the URU Office of the Dean (OD) conducted a school-wide instructional inquiry for the period of June 2024-March 2025 to better understand how students perceive the effectiveness of SA hours. The author of this article designed the feedback tools and coordinated data collection.

Data were drawn from two sources. The first was students' responses to an anonymous and voluntary online feedback form. Students were informed that responses would be used for instructional improvement and would not affect their grades. The online form consisted of three open-ended questions: (1) instructional practices perceived as helpful or less helpful, (2) instructor behaviors that supported learning, and (3) recommendations for improving SA sessions. The other data collected were the notes from student feedback discussions conducted across semesters 1–3 by the school's academic leadership team. These sessions were facilitated by academic leadership and trained faculty moderators not directly responsible for student evaluation. Discussions encouraged students to describe learning challenges, comment on instructional strategies, and reflect on the perceived value of SA support.

While both tools relied on self-reported perceptions and are therefore inherently subjective, the use of multiple data sources allowed for identification of recurring instructional themes rather than isolated opinions. Data analysis, conducted by the author, involved thematic coding and synthesis to identify recurring instructional patterns across responses. The combined dataset included responses from 31 students and sensing session observations drawn from 20 classes across 10 departments; feedback was drawn across the entire course. Identified themes are summarized in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Characteristics of SA Hours that Students Valued

A thematic review of student feedback across both sources revealed four consistent patterns in what students valued during SA hours: tailored instruction, strategy training, opportunities for student voice and choice, and supportive learning environments (see Table 1). Note that some student quotes overlap between categories, but their perceptions and pedagogical implications are clear.

Table 1
Student Voices and Pedagogical Implications

Theme	Student Voices (Representative Quotes)	Pedagogical Implications
Tailored Instruction	*"When my instructor slowed down and explained one step at a time, I finally felt like I understood how to approach listening tasks."* *"We don't always have time in class for one-on-one help."* *"When my instructor helped me break down listening passages into manageable steps, it felt like the session was really about me, not just another assignment."* *"This feedback illustrates the importance of differentiation, particularly in contexts where learners vary widely in skill mastery."*	Teachers can: • Explicitly teach steps on *how* to tackle challenging issues, such as answering test items or approaching listening. • Differentiate SA from classroom tasks by targeting specific weaknesses and using diagnostics to inform instruction.
Strategy Training	*"When I learned how to eliminate wrong answers quickly, I started passing quizzes I used to fail."* *"Previewing the questions before listening completely changed how I approached exams."* *"Before SA, I didn't know I could preview questions to guide my listening. That one trick changed everything."* *"Instead of reading a full article, my instructor had me focus just on the headline and first paragraph. That gave me confidence to keep going."* *"Breaking things down made it less overwhelming as it showed me I can succeed step by step."*	Teachers can: • Teach students to chunk difficult tasks into stages. • Integrate explicit strategy training in every SA session. • Model, practice, and reflect on transferable listening, reading comprehension and test-taking strategies, in general. • Scaffold tasks into manageable stages to build confidence and reduce cognitive overload.
Student Voice and Choice	*"When my teacher asked me what I wanted to work on, I felt in control of my learning."* *"I asked to focus on speaking practice for my oral exam, and that flexibility really helped."*	Teachers can: • Incorporate student choice into session planning to promote autonomy and ownership.
Supportive Atmosphere	*"I wasn't afraid to make mistakes there."* *"The teacher encouraged me every time I got closer to the right answer—it built my confidence."* *"It's a place where I can practice without embarrassment."* *"SA made me feel seen."*	Teachers can: • Provide emotional safety and build trust. • Establish an environment where errors are reframed as growth opportunities • Encourage students to take risks and that they can do it.

Collectively, these voices confirm that students perceive SA as most effective when it offers personalization, builds confidence, and equips students with tools for independent success. These themes suggest that effective SA is defined by both the instructional content and by the interaction of personalization, strategy development, and affective support.

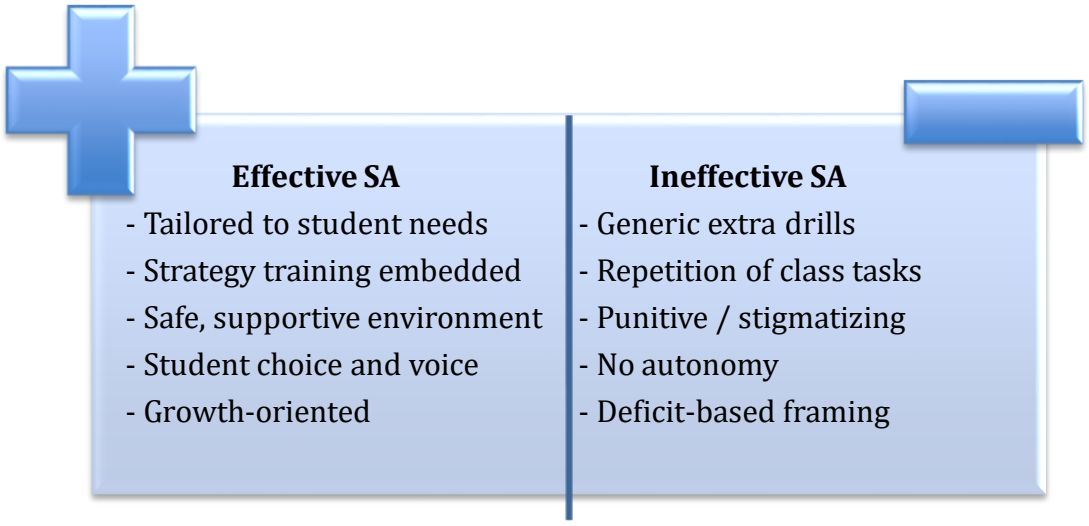
Characteristics of SA Hours that Students Did Not Value

In addition to pointing out what they valued about SA hours, data analysis also identified instructional practices that students perceived as less valuable. These fell into two main categories: lack of usefulness and perceptions of punishment. For usefulness, students did not value activities that were not related to a clear purpose. As one student noted: "We just went through another grammar drill, and it felt like a waste of time." Several students reported that SA sometimes resembled "extra homework" rather than targeted support. In the category of punishment, students commented on a feeling of stigma or negative connotation from being required to go to SA, such as this student: "Being sent to SA feels like being marked as a failure" or "Sometimes it feels like punishment." These perceptions highlight the need to refine both the instructional content and the institutional framing of SA, avoiding deficit framing and duplication of classroom drills while reframing SA as enrichment and growth.

Taken together, the findings indicate that students differentiate between helpful and unhelpful SA primarily through perceptions of instructional relevance, structure, and affective framing. Individualized and supportive SA sessions were associated with positive learning experiences, whereas repetitive or poorly structured sessions were more likely to be perceived negatively. The qualities of effective and ineffective SA hours can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Students' Perceptions of Effective vs. Ineffective SA



RECOMMENDATIONS TO DLIFLC FACULTY MEMBERS FOR TEACHING SA HOURS

Building on these findings, the following recommendations provide a framework for maximizing the impact of SA:

1. **Tailor Content and Instruction to the Student(s)' Needs**
   - Use diagnostic data (exam breakdowns, ICPT scores, DLPT practice) to design individualized tasks.
   - When possible, group students by instructional need or differentiate tasks within SA sessions. For example, one student could be given tasks to reinforce their phonological decoding for listening, while another student might be given tasks that build discourse-level comprehension.
   - Replace generic drills with authentic, targeted practice tied to student needs.
2. **Adopt a Student-Centered Approach**
   - Begin each SA with a brief check-in: "What would you like to cover today?"
   - Co-create session goals with students to promote engagement and ownership.
3. **Embed Strategy Training**
   - Dedicate time in every session for at least one explicit strategy. Options include how to preview questions prior to a listening activity/assessment, eliminate possible multiple choice answers, take notes, recognize grammatical cues such as case endings to identify syntactic relationships, attend to verb aspect to interpret temporal meaning, and register reduced speech in authentic listening passages.
   - Incorporate reflection: ask students how the strategy worked and how they might apply it outside of SA hours.
4. **Reframe SA Positively**

Because SA participation is often assigned based on academic difficulty, learners may initially interpret placement through a deficit lens, associating sessions with stigma, remediation, or evaluative pressure. Without careful instructional framing, these perceptions can inadvertently elevate anxiety and diminish motivation.

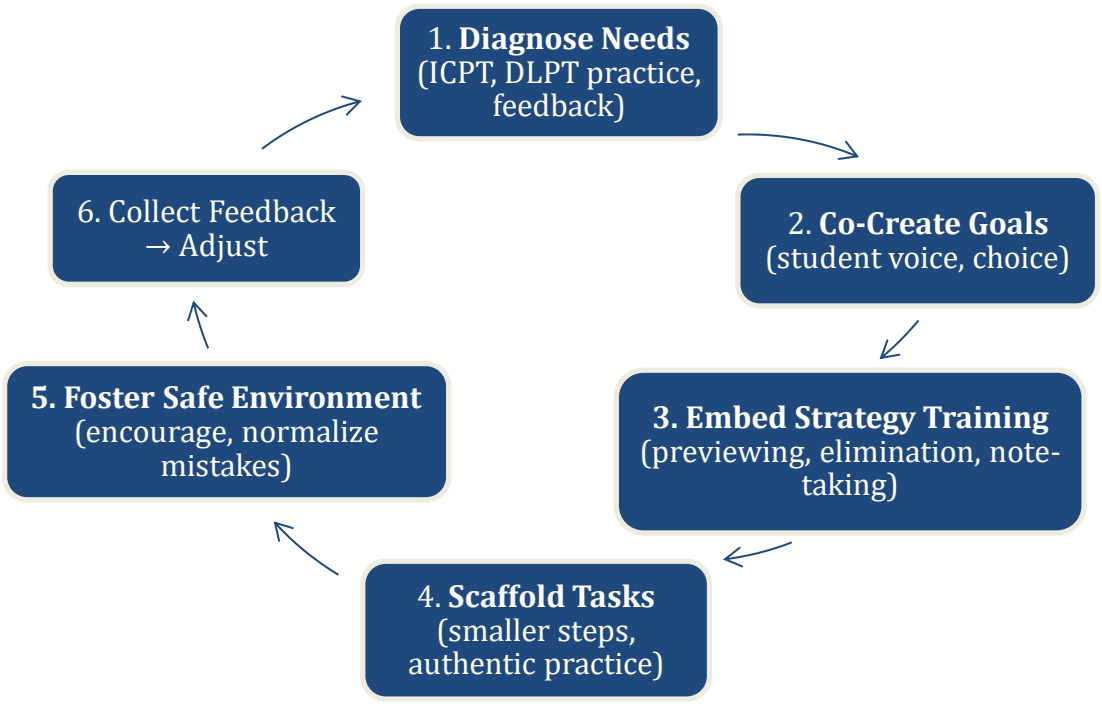
   - Avoid labels like "remedial" or "second chance." Instead, present SA as "focused skill sharpening."
   - Highlight growth by recognizing even small gains from SA participation.
5. **Foster Safe Learning Environments**
   - Use language that normalizes mistakes as part of learning: *"Every error is data."*
   - Provide encouragement that emphasizes effort and strategy use, not just outcomes.
   - Encourage students to prioritize their own learning over just getting the answer right, ensuring that they know why the answer was correct or not correct.
6. **Monitor and Evaluate Continuously**
   - Collect short student feedback after sessions to adapt approaches quickly.
   - Use cycles of action research to refine SA practices, ensuring alignment with evolving learner needs.

While many of these recommendations reflect principles of effective teaching applicable to all instructional contexts, SA hours provide a uniquely flexible environment for intensified personalization. Unlike regular classroom instruction—which must balance whole-class pacing, curriculum coverage, and group dynamics—SA sessions allow instructors to concentrate on individual learner gaps, strategy coaching, and targeted skill refinement. In this sense, SA functions not as a separate instructional model, but as an opportunity to amplify high-impact practices.

Figure 2 presents a suggested instructional sequence for conducting SA sessions based on student perceptions gathered by the URU OD. The process assumes that learners are typically assigned to SA based on prior performance indicators (e.g., test results, instructor observations). Within the SA session itself, diagnosis functions as a refinement stage rather than an initial placement decision. Instructors may draw on both objective performance data and student self-reports when identifying focal areas. While occasional discrepancies may arise between student-perceived needs and instructor-identified priorities, these differences can serve as productive entry points for dialogue, goal clarification, and strategy alignment.

The sequence then moves toward co-creating goals with learners, embedding explicit strategy training, and scaffolding tasks into manageable steps. Throughout the session, instructors foster a psychologically safe and supportive learning environment. The final stage includes collecting brief student feedback and making adjustments, reinforcing a cycle of continuous instructional improvement.

Figure 2
Recommended SA Session Flow



Conducting these steps for each SA student will require a certain amount of time; however, individualized SA **does not** necessarily imply extensive preparation. Instructors can employ efficient, low-prep techniques such as brief diagnostic conversations, targeted error analysis using recent quizzes or homework, focused strategy modeling, and micro-practice activities derived directly from classroom materials to target key difficulties. Reusing authentic listening excerpts, repurposing curriculum-based material for strategy practice, and conducting rapid feedback cycles can significantly reduce preparation demands.

Teachers can further streamline effort through resource-sharing across teaching teams or departments. Centralized repositories of SA activities, strategy exercises, listening passages, and scaffolded practice tasks can support instructional consistency while minimizing individual workload. Collaborative development of adaptable SA materials may enhance both efficiency and pedagogical alignment.

Some elements of effective SA (e.g., fostering a psychologically safe environment) require primarily an instructional mindset rather than additional preparation time. Other components, such as goal setting, may initially require greater instructor guidance, as students often articulate overly general objectives. Instructor expertise plays a critical role in helping learners refine goals toward specific, actionable skill targets.

CONCLUSION

These findings at URU suggest that students perceive Special Assistance as most effective when sessions are grounded in differentiated instruction, student-centered approaches that promote learner autonomy, explicit strategy training, supportive atmospheres, and growth-oriented framing. Aligning SA practices with evidence-based pedagogy and student perspectives can enhance learner confidence, strengthen DLPT performance, and contribute to attrition reduction.

Beyond instructional design, the results point to important institutional considerations. Because SA is frequently associated with remediation or academic difficulty, how SA is communicated and framed at the program level may influence learner motivation and engagement. Clear, consistent messaging that positions SA as a proactive performance-enhancement resource rather than a punitive measure may help mitigate stigma and increase student buy-in. Similarly, policy guidance that emphasizes personalization, strategy development, and affective support could further align SA implementation with its intended developmental purpose. Listening to student voices not only informs classroom practice but also provides valuable direction for refining SA structures, expectations, and communication strategies across DLIFLC.

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