

Dyslexia and Learning English: Literacy and Wider issues

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Definitions:

British Dyslexia Association Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty that mainly affects the development of literacy and language-related skills. It is likely to be present at birth and to be life-long in its effects. It is characterised by difficulties with phonological processing, rapid naming, working memory, processing speed, and the automatic development of skills that may not match up to an individual's other cognitive abilities. It tends to be resistant to conventional teaching methods, but its effect can be mitigated by appropriately specific intervention, including the application of information technology and supportive counselling. (<http://bdadyslexia.org.uk/dyslexic/definitions>)

International Dyslexia Association Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge. (<http://eida.org/definition-of-dyslexia/>)

International Classification of Disorders The main feature is a specific and significant impairment in the development of reading skills that is not solely accounted for by mental age, visual acuity problems, or inadequate schooling. Reading comprehension skill, reading word recognition, oral reading skill, and performance of tasks requiring reading may all be affected. Spelling difficulties are frequently associated with specific reading disorder and often remain into adolescence even after some progress in reading has been made. Specific developmental disorders of reading are commonly preceded by a history of disorders in speech or language development. Associated emotional and behavioural disturbances are common during the school age period. (<http://apps.who.int/classifications/icd10/browse/2010/en#/F81.0>)

What is dyslexia?

- Dyslexia is often a result of issues with executive function (in prefrontal cortex), in particular working memory and information processing and sequencing.
- MRI scans can show reduced activity in the part of the brain responsible for executive function in people with dyslexia and similar issues (eg dyspraxia, dyscalculia, AD(H)D)
- Dyslexic people may have difficulty processing and remembering information they see and hear.
- They may have difficulty organising themselves and paying attention, concentrating and maintaining focus.
- This can affect general learning as well as the acquisition of literacy skills.
- Dyslexic learners thus have difficulty in learning to read and/or write despite normal intelligence and conventional instruction.
- In the UK, the first flag for dyslexia is when there is a differential of 2 or more years between literacy skills and chronological age, assuming average or above intelligence and general cognitive ability.

How can we help in the English language classroom?

- be aware of each individual's precise issues
- minimise the processing load, focus on key language

- give more time
- give short, concise, linear instructions, one task at a time
- if appropriate, allocate a peer-helper
- do not put on the spot/ask to read out aloud without preparation
- give handout of whiteboard work
- encourage joined-up handwriting
- be understanding, patient, encouraging and build confidence

Material should:

- be well-structured / clear / linear with logical, predictable progression
- involve a minimum of jumping about (eg backwards and forwards, from box A to box B etc)
- have sentences on single lines where possible
- have shorter less complex sentences where possible
- keep new language to a minimum
- provide plenty of review and consolidation
- avoid too much contrastive word input (eg *their / there / they're*)
- avoid tasks designed to 'catch out' or 'test'
- be multi-sensory and multi-media where possible
- have larger, dyslexic-friendly font / larger spacing / darker background (eg off-white/cream)

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