

Dyslexia and Learning English: Literacy and Wider Issues

Jon Hird Italy TESOL, November 2017

Overview

- Dyslexia is thought to be one of the most common learning differences.
- 5 - 10% of all schoolchildren in England have some degree of dyslexia.
- Dyslexia tends to be identified more in boys than girls.

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 - 25% (?) more for tests
- 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)

Selected references:

Alloway T.P. and Alloway R. (2103). *Working Memory: The Connected Intelligence*, Psychology Press

Daloiso, M. (2017). *Supporting Learners with Dyslexia in the ELT Classroom*. OUP

Delaney, M. (2016). *Special Educational Needs*. OUP

Kormos, J. & Smith, A.M. (2012). *Teaching Languages to Students with Specific Learning Differences*. Multilingual Matters

Nijakowska, J. (2010). *Dyslexia in the foreign language classroom*. Multilingual Matters

Nijakowska, J. (2014). *Dyslexia in the EFL classroom*. Pearson

Rudland J. (2012). *Short-term Memory Difficulties in Children*, Speech Mark

Sarkadi, Á. (2008). *Vocabulary learning in dyslexia: The case of a Hungarian learner*. Kormos & Kontra (Eds.), *Language learners with special needs. An international perspective*. Multilingual Matters

Schneider, E., & Crombie, M. (2003). *Dyslexia and foreign language learning*. David Fulton Publishers

Selikowitz, M. (2012). *Dyslexia and other learning difficulties*. OUP

www.dystefl.eu

<http://eltwell.com>

<http://www.englishsoundsfun.com>

<https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/executive-functioning-issues/understanding-executive-functioning-issues>

<https://www.myetpedia.com/10-ways-to-help-dyslexic-students-in-the-elt-classroom>

jon.hird@conted.ox.ac.uk

jonhird.com



Jon Hird ELT



@jonhirdelt