

Dyslexia and Learning English

Jon Hird Switzerland, September 2018

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, a key 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 and avoid more abstract terms
- 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 (but remember this is not always affective)
- have larger, dyslexic-friendly font / larger spacing / darker background (eg off-white/cream)

Selected references:

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