How to teach English to students with dyslexia

Introduction

Recent years have seen an increased awareness of the presence of students with dyslexia in our classrooms, and research is helping teachers understand the nature, causes, and challenges of dyslexia. Learning English as a foreign language can be challenging for dyslexic students so what should the English language teacher do to help them? What do teachers need to know? How should they adapt their teaching style? What techniques can they use to support learners with dyslexia? In this brief guide, Michele Daloiso explains dyslexia and how it affects learners; provides some general strategies for teaching; and suggests some practical techniques and activities for the classroom.

What is dyslexia?

Here is the definition approved by the British Dyslexia Association in October 2007.

> 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 lifelong in its effects. It is characterized 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.

This definition highlights some key features of dyslexia. Firstly, dyslexia is not the result of brain damage or poor teaching. It is a learning difference, probably of genetic origin, which appears spontaneously at a certain moment in the learner's development. It never goes away because it's not an illness, but rather a particular way in which the brain processes some inputs. Secondly, dyslexia does not affect *all* the abilities of a person. Students with dyslexia have average cognitive and social skills, but encounter specific difficulties in the three following areas.

1 Phonological processing

When we speak, we emit a continuous flow of sounds connected to each other – we do not pause after each word, but only at the end of each sentence. However, when we read, if we want to pronounce a word correctly we have to recognize a set of distinct written symbols, put them together, and associate them with the sounds of the language. Therefore, reading requires a high level of phonological analysis, which enables readers to divide the words up into syllables, recognize rhyming words, identify similar or different sounds, etc. This is the area which causes greatest difficulty for a student with dyslexia and can lead to two consequences:

- the reading process might be slow and/or imprecise
- students may have difficulty with the processing of sounds, so they might struggle to distinguish between different sounds and perceive speaking as being faster than it actually is.

2 Working memory

This is the component of human memory that enables us to hold some information temporarily, e.g. a telephone number, a car number plate, or something which has just been said, so that we can process it and reuse it later. It has been argued that dyslexia affects working memory, so specific attention should be paid to devising strategies which will make information easier to memorize.

3 Processing speed

It has been claimed that people with dyslexia find it hard to make some skills automatic, so they are slower when engaged in tasks requiring fast responses or the use of more than one skill at a time. Importantly, the issue of skills automation does not apply only to language, but also to motor coordination skills. This explains why some students with dyslexia are said to be clumsy and disorganized, and experience visual orientation difficulties. For example, they might get lost when a teacher gives an instruction, such as 'Turn to page 37, exercise 7, in the bottom right corner of the page.'

These three areas of difficulty have an impact on the development of literacy skills, because reading and writing require:

- a good level of phonological skills in order to analyse sound–letter patterns
- a good working memory in order to retain the visual information of a word, connect it to its pronunciation, retrieve the movements necessary to pronounce it, etc.
- rapid processing, because it is assumed that students eventually learn to read and write more quickly.

As a consequence of dyslexia, students might read more slowly and inaccurately and make spelling mistakes. Generally speaking, students with dyslexia often find it difficult to both read and write, and this is due to the fact that the processes of reading and writing share some common features, i.e. phonological processing, working memory, and processing speed.

The areas of difficulty described above can also affect the development of some language-related skills, i.e. the use of language to perform important cognitive tasks, such as studying, organizing information, or describing a fact or process. Among these language-related skills are copying from the board, dictation, taking notes, memorizing a sequence of information, and reading aloud.

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Prejudices and myths about dyslexia

Here are some common prejudices and myths about dyslexia which have been proven wrong by research. It is important to keep them in mind and avoid applying them to dyslexic students.

Students with dyslexia are rare

The British Dyslexia Association claims that 10% of the British population has dyslexia. This means that there could be at least one student with dyslexia in each class. The teaching community is only recently becoming aware of this – in the past students who consistently got poor results at school were labelled 'dunces' or 'lazy'.

Dyslexic students are less intelligent

Students with dyslexia show some atypical performances when compared to their peers, but their intelligence is absolutely normal. Confusion might arise from the fact that learning to read and write is complex and requires many cognitive skills. Learners with dyslexia and learners with cognitive disability both have difficulty in developing literacy skills, but for the former, this is the consequence of weaknesses in the specific areas mentioned above, while for the latter it is due to a more general cognitive delay.

Dyslexic students don't do well at school because they don't study

This confuses the causes with the consequences of dyslexia. The fact that dyslexic students get poor results can be attributed to two different causes. They apply themselves just as much as their peers, but classroom activities and materials do not take their learning differences into account. The students *do* study, but they are not working in a supportive environment. Alternatively, it could be the case that they have faced constant failure and frustration throughout their school career, and have become completely demotivated. However, one must take great care not to draw wrong conclusions here: it will not be enough for these students to increase their efforts, if teachers do not adapt their methodology.

Dyslexia is a temporary difficulty

Many students encounter difficulties with literacy, but over time and with practice they eventually overcome these obstacles. However, this is not the case with dyslexia. It is a lifelong learning difference, which students can only learn to compensate for by developing effective strategies.

Dyslexic students are doomed to fail

Orlando Bloom and Keanu Reeves, Andy Warhol and Pablo Picasso, John Lennon and Cher, Thomas Edison and Albert Einstein – these are famous actors, artists, and scientists who probably have nothing else in common other than their dyslexia. This shows how students with dyslexia can be talented and brilliant, and can achieve great success in the wider world, despite their poor results in the classroom. In some cases, their schools had just failed to recognize and support their learning differences and, in so doing, had failed to enable their academic success.

Barriers to learning English for students with dyslexia

Learning English can be a demanding task for many students, but for those with dyslexia it can be even more challenging. There can be three kinds of barriers to language learning which are worth considering here.

1 The nature of English

The first barrier comes from some specific properties of English which make it difficult for students with dyslexia. According to some studies, the manifestations of dyslexia depend very much on what type of language is being learned, and more specifically, how regular its spelling is. For example, languages such as German, Spanish, and Italian are very regular in that their spelling corresponds directly to pronunciation. English, on the other hand, is highly irregular in that there is little correspondence between how a word is said and how it is written. For example, /aɪ/ can be written in several ways, such as *time*, *fly*, *buy*, and *lie*. The main consequence is that in English students with dyslexia will not only read slowly, but also inaccurately, and they will not reproduce the spelling of the words easily.

2 Foreign-language context

The second barrier comes from the fact that learning English as a *foreign* language is not the same as learning it as a *native* language. The main differences which cause challenges for students with dyslexia are:

Teaching methods Teachers of English as a native language usually spend a lot of time on the development of literacy skills through phonics and spelling activities, which are claimed to be essential to become proficient readers in such an orthographically irregular language. This is not the case in the foreign-language context, in which the communicative approach is widely used. The focus on communication leaves less room for the systematic study of the relationship between pronunciation and spelling, which are problematic for students with dyslexia. The lack of emphasis on the new sounds of English, in comparison with the student's native language, might also cause extra difficulties which are not present in the mother tongue, such as poor listening comprehension skills.

Time for practice When you learn English as a native language you are constantly surrounded by that language, so developing oral skills and learning new words comes naturally as a consequence of immersion. This is not the case in the foreign-language context, and this proves challenging for students with dyslexia because they need more time to develop language skills. Since teachers often have only limited time for practice, they sometimes give students lists of words to memorize. Students with dyslexia do not benefit from this approach, because it does not offer associations they can relate to, such as the use of images, which might aid memorization.

Bottom-up versus top-down language learning When English is taught as a native language, learners will usually already have a six-year background of natural acquisition of the language at an oral level, so it is easier for them to understand the structures explained in class, since they have some informal background knowledge to refer to. The process for them is 'bottom-up', i.e. from practice to theory. It is quite the opposite in the foreign-language context, when grammar rules are often presented from the very beginning without the students having any background in the foreign language. As a consequence, the study of rules is often problematic for students with dyslexia, especially if they are presented in a formal, abstract way, or by using complex terminology.

3 Classroom activities

The third barrier comes from some common classroom activities and exercises which can cause anxiety to dyslexic students because they focus on their difficulties rather than their strengths. Here are some examples.

Reading aloud This kind of exercise does not facilitate good text comprehension. When non-native students read aloud, they concentrate their efforts on pronunciation, intonation, and sentence structure, and they may struggle to understand what they have just read. To help students with dyslexia, teachers should first read the text slowly themselves, to provide the right intonation, and then let the students reread it silently.

Dictation Generally students with dyslexia have trouble with spelling, so dictation can become extremely frustrating for them, and should therefore be avoided. Teachers often assume that dictation is useful to practise spelling, but it is worth bearing in mind that English does not have regular spelling patterns, so you are not necessarily able to spell a word just because you hear it. When faced with words they do not know, students with dyslexia cannot fall back on the correspondence between sounds and letters, and therefore are forced to 'invent' a written form for that word. Dictation can be useful to test how well students have previously memorized the orthography of some words, but for students with dyslexia this means being tested on the one thing they cannot do best due to their learning difference.

Copying from the board This can be frustrating for students with dyslexia as they are forced to focus all their attention on trying to decode what the teacher is writing and then reproducing it in their own notebook. If you examine their notebooks, you will see that what they have copied down is often spelled incorrectly, and sometimes is almost incomprehensible. You should be aware of this, and try to limit how much you use the board as a teaching tool. Instead, refer more to the textbook, use multimedia equipment, and distribute handouts. It would also be helpful to use a computer and video projector, or an interactive whiteboard instead of the traditional blackboard, as these tools allow you to save the work that is done on the computer monitor.

Doing activities without support Replying orally to questions, improvising dialogues, and giving short monologues can be stressful because they demand automatic language responses which students with dyslexia may struggle to master. Structured exercises which offer a step-by-step approach and provide examples of the language to use (e.g. words and phrases) will be more helpful to students with dyslexia. Other tasks which cannot be done without specific support are memorizing sequences, such as the alphabet or numbers, and spelling out words.

General strategies for teaching students with dyslexia

In the English language classroom, the teacher plays a vital role in setting objectives and selecting materials and methodology. This section explores three important principles to keep in mind when working with students with dyslexia.

1 Provide materials in an accessible format

Students with dyslexia often report finding materials, whether paper-based or web-based, confusing. One important reason for this confusion is that texts are often not presented or organized in a way that is easy for students with dyslexia to use. To overcome this, it is possible to adapt texts to make them more accessible. (Indeed, it is fair to say that every student would benefit from presenting texts in a way that makes them more readable and better organized.) Table 1 summarizes the main points to consider when adapting texts for dyslexic students. The suggestions draw inspiration from the British Dyslexia Association Style Guide and my own research on foreign-language learning accessibility.

Table 1

Graphic strategies

- Use sans serif fonts, such as Arial, Tahoma, and Verdana. There are also open access typefaces specifically designed for students with dyslexia, such as Lexia Readable, Open Dyslexic, and Dyslexie.
- Choose a text size between 13 point and 15 point, depending on the font that is chosen.
- Use line spacing of at least 1.5.
- Align text to the left.
- Use bold and/or colour to highlight parts of the text.
- When possible, avoid an all-white background – use a pale pastel colour instead.
- Avoid organizing the text into two or more columns.

Text organization strategies

In some cases of severe dyslexia, graphic strategies, although important, might not be enough. In these cases, reading passages can be adapted from a linguistic and textual point of view. Here are some possible strategies.

- Structure the text into short paragraphs.
- If the text is long, divide it into several paragraphs.
- Give each paragraph a clear heading.
- At the beginning of each text, include an index or list of headings and subheadings to help students get a general idea of the text before they begin reading.
- Choose a direct style of writing. Avoid long sentences, the passive form, or double negatives such as *It's not that I don't like it* or *It's not impossible*.
- Where possible, organize the information into bullet-point lists.
- When dealing with narrative texts, remember that direct speech (dialogues) is more accessible.
- When setting class or homework exercises, give simple instructions, be clear about what students should focus on, and give examples.
- Calculate the legibility of the text. (This function is generally included in most writing software programs.)

Extra-linguistic strategies

The following strategies can make the text even more accessible to any students who have global and visual learning styles.

- Where possible, insert images which support text comprehension.
- If there are already images in the text, check their appropriateness in relation to text content.
- Where possible, use graphs and/or tables to summarize some of the text information.
- If appropriate, associate the written text with audiovisual materials, such as a video clip, to introduce or reinforce written comprehension.

2 Use multi-sensory techniques

Research in neuroscience has shown that the greater the number of pathways which are stimulated in the learning process, the easier it will be to remember information. For example, an idiomatic expression which has only been heard is unlikely to be recalled, but if the same expression is heard, pronounced aloud, and linked to an image and/or personal experience, there is a better chance that it will be remembered.

This principle is even more important if applied to students with dyslexia, who often have a global learning style which relies on visual input, creative learning, and practical experiences. For example, because they have difficulty memorizing out-of-context lists of words and phrases, dyslexic students may have a better chance of creating mnemonic connections if language input is presented in a way that involves other sensory channels, as well as hands-on experiences.

When it comes to teaching materials, there is plenty to choose from: books, multimedia support, digital books, online exercises, learning platforms, etc., so it should not be necessary to create materials from scratch. However, it is advisable to check your teaching materials to find out how multi-sensory the activities are. If you notice that they activate only one or two sensory channels, try to integrate other sensory channels into the materials. Table 2 shows some examples of support materials that will make classroom activities more multi-sensory.

3 Integrate technology into teaching

Technology is often cited as a mainstay form of support for students with dyslexia because it can help them compensate for some of their limitations. English language teaching materials often come with technology-based support materials, which can be extremely useful. For example:

E-books These are interactive and amplified versions of the traditional Student's Book and Workbook, with a number of additional important functions such as:

- Video resources and extra film clips connected to the units in the book. They can be used in class or set for homework, as they are more stimulating than images and drawings.
- Audio recordings of reading passages and other written exercises, which students with dyslexia can use while (or instead of) reading. In some cases, there is a karaoke function that highlights the parts of the text being read. If used for personal study, students can listen as many times as they feel is necessary.
- Various interactive exercises, such as dragging items or reordering words to form a sentence. Some exercises require written production, which is often a hard task for students with dyslexia, but as they are done on the computer, at least they will cause fewer problems with spelling.

Interactive whiteboard Although interactive whiteboards are not yet available in all classrooms, they are an extremely useful tool for students with dyslexia. Firstly, you can save notes, tables, or maps produced in class onto files, and this avoids the student with dyslexia having to copy things down from the board. Secondly, they allow students to work in a more tactile way and are less complicated to use than a traditional computer, which requires a mouse, keyboard, modem, etc. Moreover, there are many software programs available for the interactive whiteboard and these can also be extremely beneficial from a multi-sensory point of view. This technology is becoming increasingly tactile and intuitive (which makes it accessible even to pre-school children), and this allows the student to concentrate more on the content of the activity than on how to operate the technology.

Text-to-speech technology This allow a document to be digitally read aloud. Some of it is free and readily available on tablets and laptops. However, sound quality is not always perfect, and sometimes you need to purchase software upgrades to get better quality. In general, text-to-speech technology is useful to students with dyslexia because it not only eliminates the need to decode the written word but also provides support for comprehension and pronunciation skills.

In fact, text-to-speech technology is useful for all students, as well as those with dyslexia, because teaching and learning English as a foreign language presents some difficulties that are common to all students. Firstly, teachers are hardly ever native speakers so cannot offer perfect linguistic input. Secondly, students are not in an environment of total immersion so often need extra help, particularly with listening and pronunciation skills, as these are some of the most difficult areas to improve without frequent exposure to the language. Thirdly, sometimes the students' parents are not particularly competent in English so cannot provide additional support at home.

These difficulties can be partially overcome by encouraging students to use text-to-speech technology, as well as the audio recordings in an e-book, as it enables students to read a text and then compare their performance with the recording of the native speaker. This can also help overcome pronunciation difficulties without the laborious process of referring to the phonetic transcripts in traditional dictionaries. Text-to-speech technology also often allows learners to control the speed of the speech utterances, so that they can do listening exercises at a more comfortable speed.

Table 2

Support	Sensory channels involved	Comments
Drawings	Sight	These non-realistic images are commonly used to support oral input. Images are a good link but sometimes they are not so effective with adolescents, who may find them childish. Moreover, this is a two-dimensional medium and thus limited in the way it involve the senses.
Photos	Sight	Photos have the same advantages and disadvantages as drawings, but they might recall the students' own experience in a more direct way by presenting a context which is more realistic and closer to their reality. Photos should preferably be taken by the students themselves as this would increase their impact.
Video	Sight and hearing	Videos are more dynamic as they are almost three-dimensional and can offer a wider range of non-linguistic input. As well as hearing language, students can also see other aspects, such as clothing, the environment, facial expressions, etc., and these aspects may be zoomed in on. Videos can be watched again and again, each time with a different focus and without boring students, and for this reason they are more effective than drawings and photos.
Real objects	Sight, hearing, touch (taste)	Real-life objects, such as a magazine, train ticket, or recipe, are more involving on several sensory levels because they can be seen, touched, and manipulated. Real-life objects provide a bridge to a foreign culture which might otherwise appear distant to the students.
Coloured posters	Sight, touch	The use of colours is an excellent strategy for involving students with dyslexia. Teachers can highlight verbs, nouns, suffixes, and word roots with different colours. Posters in different colours can be used for different categories of words, such as nouns, articles, or verbs, and this will help students formulate whole sentences. This method will also make the teaching of grammar much more stimulating.
Technology	Sight, hearing, touch	The term 'technology' can be used to describe hardware (computer, interactive whiteboard, tablet, etc.) and software (programs which need to be installed). Generally speaking, the use of technology is an excellent way to involve students and make lessons more interactive, but it is advisable to assess the multi-sensory aspects of each item of technology individually to make sure the tasks are suitable for students with dyslexia.
Mind maps	Sight, touch	Mind maps are said to be useful for students with dyslexia. They are more effective if they are created by teachers and students together, so that they can customize them according to their needs and learning styles. In this case, the process of creating one's own mind map is extremely engaging from a multi-sensory point of view.
Movement	Sight, hearing, touch	Those activities which involve the greatest number of senses are the ones in which students move, manipulate, and create concrete objects. This could be a very simple activity like Total Physical Response (of the 'listen and do' type) or could be more complex and connected to other areas of study, e.g. in a school for tourism, this might be simulations of working in a restaurant or at a hotel reception; in a vocational institute, it might be mending a broken object. Here the language becomes the concrete means of communication and is more comprehensible because it is associated with a wide range of stimuli.

Even if technology is not available in the classroom, it is still vital to inform students with dyslexia about any Even if technology is not available in the classroom, it is still vital to inform students with dyslexia about any digital resources and tools which complement the traditional textbook and to suggest activities for them to do at home with these resources in order to consolidate classroom activities.

Teaching techniques for students with dyslexia

We will now take a closer look at the most common exercises used to develop language skills, and discuss their suitability for students with dyslexia. The main aim here is to explain why some activities can work, while others can be too frustrating for dyslexic students. However, you should keep in mind that each student is unique, including those with dyslexia. Therefore, ultimately it will be your daily contact with your students which will determine your choice of the most appropriate techniques for them.

Reading and listening

In general, before doing comprehension activities with a reading or listening text, it is a good idea to set a context for the text. Since students with dyslexia prefer to learn in a global manner, this pre-comprehension phase could be extended by doing activities which focus on visual stimuli (video, images, etc.) and provide the necessary support for the next phase, which will focus on the text itself, knowledge of the topic, formulation of hypotheses on the text, introduction of key words, etc.

Listen/read and do This type of task will work, provided that the 'do' activity is intended to be functional, e.g. colouring, completing a map, choosing the right picture, performing a physical action, and not linguistic. Those activities which are part of Total Physical Response methodology are successful because they do not require linguistic production and allow language to be integrated by using other kinds of communication, i.e. through gestures or physical objects.

Those techniques in which the 'do' activity is linguistic, such as translating, paraphrasing, or summarizing, are not recommended for dyslexic students, because they have a high level of cognitive complexity, require written composition, and offer fewer opportunities to check comprehension objectively.

Here are some typical reading and listening activities with comments on their suitability for students with dyslexia:

- Complete the sentences/table This will work because the technique is structured and the writing activity is restricted.
- Complete the sentences/table with the words from the box This will work for students who do not have difficulty with spatial orientation.
- Number the information/events in the correct order This technique should be used with care, because putting items in sequence is a tedious activity for many students with dyslexia.
- Tick (✓) the words you hear This exercise can work, although students may have to listen to the track several times because of their difficulty in discriminating between sounds.
- Answer the question This is to be avoided because two linguistic abilities are required at the same time (read/listen and write), which is problematic for students with dyslexia, given their difficulty in multi-tasking activities involving language-related skills.

True/false or multiple choice These activities are recommended as being fairly accessible for dyslexic students because they are structured and do not require simultaneous use of several language skills. However, when setting them, check each item carefully and make sure that it is formulated in a clear and unambiguous way. Moreover, as students with dyslexia often lose track of what they are reading due to spatial orientation difficulties, it can be helpful to use a table format and insert each item on a new line. In this way, students will be able to follow what they are reading more easily as the table gridlines will help keep the items visually separate.

Open questions These are problematic for two reasons. Firstly, they rely only on language, so no other sensory channel is stimulated. Secondly, they are used to check comprehension, but the student's replies at times do not give information which can be objectively assessed. It is difficult to determine whether a missing reply is because students have not fully understood the text or because they do not have sufficient language to be able to reply.

In the case of reading, when questions refer to information clearly stated in the text, a possible solution might be to ask the student to highlight the answers in the text itself.

In the case of listening, you could give the student a transcript of the dialogue or text. This would be especially useful when the exercises demand considerable oral comprehension, which students with dyslexia can only achieve after listening to the recording several times. This is not always possible in class, for organizational reasons, so giving the transcript can be a good support for these students. With some digital products, it is possible to hear a recording of a dialogue or text, with the option of the written text appearing as it is being read.

If you need to check the understanding of inference (i.e. the ability to use two or more pieces of information in a text in order to arrive at an answer that is implicit), other techniques, such as true/false, multiple choice, or matching tasks would be more appropriate for students with dyslexia.

Speaking

Table 3 is an assessment of the most common speaking activities, placed in order from guided to free communication. Since activities with a great degree of freedom can be very difficult for students with dyslexia, you could pick one of the more guided activities as a preliminary step, e.g. do a dramatization exercise or guided dialogue before a role-play activity, so that the student will have a model on which to base the role-play.

Writing

Depending on the age and level of the students, textbooks may include written activities which require only the reproduction of language, or they may require more creative and engaging compositions. The first type of task generally consists of dictation and copying texts or exercises, which are frustrating for students with dyslexia, even in their own language.

When working with primary school children, you could use ad hoc sound–symbol exercises and occasionally introduce copying activities in the form of a game. The aim of this would be to establish certain graphic forms, but it must be remembered that this takes time and students with dyslexia would benefit from individual training, which is not always possible in mainstream schools.

As students progress in their language studies, they may be asked to produce written work that involves the creation of their own texts. In the foreign-language

Table 3

guided communication ↓ free communication	Dramatization	This consists of the reproduction, in pairs or small groups, of dialogues from the text. This type of exercise is not problematic, especially if students with dyslexia are not required to memorize lines and simply have to reproduce what they have heard, with the help of the written text.
	Guided dialogue	This requires students to create a dialogue similar to one they have already been given, and to change some details. The guided dialogue is recommended for students with dyslexia as a draft is prepared before the students act out the dialogue. As this exercise is generally done in pairs or small groups, the task of writing the dialogue can be given to another student.
	Information gap	This requires students to exchange information orally to complete a task, e.g. fill in a table. It involves a certain degree of spontaneity in communication and it could be difficult for students who struggle to express themselves in the foreign language. You could provide a series of model expressions or phrases which students can then use to complete the task.
	Exchange of information	This involves a freer exchange of information and ideas. The aim is either to provide loosely-structured practice or to exchange opinions on a given topic. In the former, peer tutoring should be promoted so students with dyslexia are supported by classmates while interacting in the foreign language. In the latter, you could give students with dyslexia model expressions from which they can then create their own sentences in a more personal way.
	Role-play	This technique provides students with only the scenario and the roles, on the basis of which they are then expected to improvise a dialogue without any written support. Role-play can be extremely problematic for students with dyslexia, and for this reason it is better to replace or precede it with the previous activities.

context, free writing production must always be the ultimate target, which can only be reached step by step. Students with dyslexia will find it difficult to achieve this target but it will not be impossible. Here is a procedure that should help students with dyslexia progress towards free writing.

1 Analyse the type and purpose of a text Give students an example of a text that they will be asked to produce later, e.g. a letter, description, or review, and help them identify the main features of the text, such as the purpose, text organization, register, style, and useful language. These features could be summarized through mind maps and diagrams.

2 Provide fill-in-the-gap writing tasks Give students a new example of the same text type to be completed with certain details. If students find this difficult, you can provide some model expressions or phrases to complete the text. You can also create your own fill-in-the-gap writing tasks by using one of the texts in your textbook and simply removing some words or parts of sentences, which students then have to complete.

3 Move on to progressively freer tasks This step should be approached cautiously. It might be useful to analyse the exercises in your textbook. Often the textbook offers a summarized outline for the written composition, e.g. 'Write an email to a friend and tell him/her about your trip to London', followed by a bullet-point list of the information the student should include in the composition. To make this task more accessible to students with dyslexia, you could produce an editable document containing the text, with empty lines for the student to fill in next to each bullet point. The document might even include useful model expressions, if necessary. This layout will be useful for dyslexic students as it will guide them through the writing process.

Vocabulary

Here is a list of typical vocabulary exercises, with comments on their suitability for students with dyslexia.

Word–picture matching This technique is fairly accessible for students with dyslexia as it integrates verbal information with an image and does not require language production. Textbooks often include a variation on this which requires students to write the word next to the corresponding drawing. This might work during the revision and consolidation phase, but students with dyslexia need extra hints to successfully retrieve words from memory. Therefore indicating the first two letters of each word can be useful. As a first step it could also be helpful to ask students to say the word – students with dyslexia sometimes know how to say a word, but do not remember how to write it.

Textbooks also contain exercises which require students to match words with definitions or translations, or to match adjectives with their opposites. This kind of combination exercise could prove taxing for students who have difficulties with visual orientation. Moreover, many students with dyslexia have a visual learning style, so these techniques are much more difficult for them because they contain only linguistic information.

Language puzzles, crosswords, word searches These games are said to be helpful to students with dyslexia as they enhance their awareness of how words are spelled. However, in foreign-language classes, where there is little room for specific training on sound–letter correspondences, phonology, and spelling, they are likely to prove frustrating, so they should be used with caution. In the case of crosswords, it may be appropriate to insert a series of letter clues at some strategic points in the crossword, e.g. in the spaces where the words cross each other vertically and horizontally, to avoid a situation where students are not able to complete the task because of their spelling errors.

Set-forming exercises Activities in which students have to form sets of words based on certain criteria are particularly useful vocabulary tasks, especially if the criteria are semantic, rather than grammatical, i.e. where the focus is on the meaning of words rather than their spelling. Students can also be asked to highlight the words that belong to the same set in a specific colour, thus avoiding the need for them to rewrite the words. Another very useful exercise is completing a mind map on the basis of a category of words, e.g. food or body parts, which allows students with dyslexia to put vocabulary into a visual diagram.

Vocabulary in context This type of exercise requires students to reflect on vocabulary in complete sentences or within a text. The advantage of this is that it provides a context. However, in some cases, the procedures needed to complete the activity can prove complex for students who have difficulty with visual–spatial orientation of the page. For example, when asked to complete a text using a set of words provided, students have to frequently interrupt their reading of the text, which often results in them losing their place. Here are two examples of this type of exercise, and ways in which they could be adapted:

- *Complete the sentences/text with the words (from the box)* Cloze tests pose problems of spatial orientation because students must continually read and consult the box, which means that they often lose their place in the text. They can be made more accessible by placing a choice of different words in the spaces, so students find them placed directly in the text, rather than in a separate box.
- *Find the words in the text which mean …* This is a complex exercise because it requires scanning the text several times to search for specific words. It can

be replaced by an activity which requires students to match words with their synonyms, possibly underlining the phrase in the text where you can find the words whose synonyms have been provided, so that students are helped by the context without having to read the whole text several times.

Grammar

Students with dyslexia have a literal, experiential, and global style of thinking, so it should come as no surprise that studying grammar can prove confusing for them, especially if it is perceived as abstract discourse. It is helpful to devise ways of engaging students in grammar work which are more experiential and practical. The following procedure may be useful.

1 **Introduce grammar in context** Generally speaking, textbook grammar sections explicitly analyse language forms which were contained in a previous oral/written text, using ready-made tables. Instead of starting with these tables to explain the rules, begin with a *noticing* phase, in which concrete examples of the form are identified and underlined in the text itself.

2 **Present grammar rules in a multi-sensory way** After commenting on the examples in the text, students can then study the grammar rules. At this point there may be difficulties due to the fact that language analysis is required, and this is, by definition, abstract. You can make this phase more accessible through multi-sensory strategies. For example, if students have to study the use of prefixes, you can use colour coding to assign different colours to different word parts in order to distinguish the roots from the prefixes. If you want to focus on word order, you or your students can copy the various parts of the sentence (nouns, verbs, etc.) onto different coloured cards, and match the order of the elements in a sentence to a specific colour order. In this way students will learn to build a sentence by combining different items based on their colour code. This is also useful to compare word order in different languages.

3 **Select the most accessible exercises** For the practice stage, select an appropriate exercise, bearing in mind that for students with dyslexia some techniques are more accessible than others. For example, an exercise requiring students to choose the form or the correct answer does not create any particular difficulties, nor does combining two items. Similarly, tasks that require students to reflect on the meaning of a sentence, such as in the use of verb tenses, can also be effective.

4 **Suggest reinforcement activities for homework** Classroom activities alone will not be enough for students with dyslexia to assimilate a particular grammatical point. It will be essential to come to an agreement with students and their families about reinforcement/consolidation activities to be done at home. You can select from the workbook or e-book consolidation exercises identified here as being the most accessible for students with dyslexia.

A final message

In conclusion, I would like to quote George Evans' words: 'Every student can learn, just not on the same day, or the same way'. This is also true for students with dyslexia, who are not doomed to failure in language learning. As teachers, we should try to use all possible strategies so no student is left behind. I hope this guide can make an initial contribution to achieving this objective.

Recommended reading

British Dyslexia Association This organization provides a wealth of information and support. Find their website at http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/

Daloiso, M. (forthcoming). *Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Students with Dyslexia: From Theory to Practice.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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

Nijakowska, J. (2010). *Dyslexia in the Foreign Language Classroom.* Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Reid, G. (2009). *Dyslexia: A Practitioner's Handbook.* (Fourth Edition). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Schneider, E. and **Crombie, M.** (2003). *Dyslexia and Foreign Language Learning.* London: Fulton.

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