



Dyslexia and the Dreaded Friday Spelling Test: How Does Dyslexia Appear in a Classroom Environment?

By Conrad Bell

Introduction

Dyslexia, despite now being recognised as the most common Special Educational Need (SEN) in UK classrooms (Handler et al., 2011)¹, has only, somewhat recently, been recognised as an SEN. This has been a relief for the dyslexic community, helping students to gain an understanding into their learning style and the freedom to make mistakes.

Growing up as a dyslexic in early 2000s rural North Wales posed an array of different challenges, and caused me to fall behind in a lot of areas, in and out of the educational setting. However, thanks to a mixture of rising awareness and funding around dyslexia in the educational system, along with very pushy parents, I managed to finish school relatively successfully². My story is not one that is always told, and for many students having dyslexia can be a starting challenge they are never fully able to overcome.

This writing will offer a concise guide to: some of the key features in dyslexic students, how dyslexia can affect learning in a classroom environment, how to fully unlock the learning potential of someone with dyslexia, the effect that unsupported dyslexia can have from an early age as well how to identify dyslexia. If you are a parent of a dyslexic child, working in a school with dyslexic students, or just want to gain some insight into the dyslexic world; I hope this will be of some use to you.³

Basic summary of dyslexia

Dyslexia is most famous for its association with affecting the reading and spelling abilities of students. However, these are just some of the recognisable effects dyslexia has to offer, and under the surface shows up in all aspects of life, not just education. Like most SENs, the

¹ reports that each classroom will have around 5 children with dyslexia

² Success is a relative term; in my case it was all Cs GCSE, CCB A-level, 2:2 undergrad and Masters Merit.

³ This writing will focus on primary level education.

definition of dyslexia was debated for some time. As its meaning is so broad, it was hard to cover all of the different ways it affects people in a clear and concise manner. The Rose report of 2009 offers the clearest definition and is the one officially used today.

Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed. Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities. It is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points. Co-occurring difficulties may be seen in aspects of language, motor coordination, mental calculation, concentration and personal organisation, but these are not, by themselves, markers of dyslexia. A good indication of the severity and persistence of dyslexic difficulties can be gained by examining how the individual responds or has responded to well-founded intervention.

(Rose, 2009)

The British Dyslexia Association later added to this definition say:

The British Dyslexia Association (BDA) acknowledges the visual and auditory processing difficulties that some individuals with dyslexia can experience, and points out that dyslexic readers can show a combination of abilities and difficulties that affect the learning process. Some also have strengths in other areas, such as design, problem solving, creative skills, interactive skills and oral skills.

BDA (2010)

These definitions are anything but concise, but that is the nature of an SEN which has so many variables. Having so many different symptoms of an SEN and only one branching term can make it very difficult to fully diagnose and support. Students may only suffer from a few of these, or all of them, meaning the support of dyslexia students needs to be on a case-by-case basis. At its core, dyslexia is not just about how well you can read or write, it is about how you ability to process information as a whole. This writing will focus on dyslexia from a classroom point of view and how a dyslexic student processes being in a standard classroom environment. If you have no prior knowledge of what dyslexia is; here is a very basic breakdown of the diagnostics.

- It is an SEN that affects the way a person processes information. This can affect reading and writing, where someone struggles to decipher or phonically break down words.
- Affects all aspects of life. Dyslexia can cause disorganisation, visual problems, discoordination, short term memory issues and many more issues which can affect education and day-to-day life.
- There are 3 strands; Trauma dyslexia, primary dyslexia and secondary dyslexia⁴. (Adubasim & Laurier, 2017)
- Although people can develop their ability to process information and work on the skills that dyslexia can affect; it is not curable and people will always be affected by dyslexia.
- It does have a number of positive attitudes as well which can be utilised. Dyslexics often are very creative and have very powerful visual skills (Petrova, 2023).

The classroom and dyslexia

The classroom

Teaching effective lessons and catering to everyone's learning style is an impossible job in today's education system. Delivering a lesson to 30+ students who all have differing needs, abilities, SENs, backgrounds, learning styles, physical needs, upbringings, beliefs (the list can go on), means that teachers need to create lessons which fit the majority⁵. Due to this, the most common teaching approaches in mainstream school struggle to fit with the dyslexic way of learning⁶. Even though modern teaching styles have supposedly improved the standard of teaching compared to more traditional methods (Mehta, 2023). There are arguments that traditional methods are still the backbone of teaching standards in the UK (Adams, 2014), and many studies agree that overall they yield better results than modern teaching styles (Hiep, 2000). Traditional teaching methods are explained in the 2016 Journal of Education and Practice:

The traditional teaching approach in schools is oriented towards the teacher who transfers verbal information which is specific for each lesson, while students are passive observers who sit, listen, copy, memorize⁷ and repeat everything the teacher says

⁴ Also known as developmental dyslexia.

⁵ I understand you can be differentiated; it will be explained how this does not always work either.

⁶ This is not a criticism of teachers, but highlights the difficulties of the job.

⁷ Sorry for the American spelling.

(Ivić, 2016)

It is easy to see why a traditional teaching style would be the most effective way of teaching. It lends itself well to the majority of learning styles as it can include visual, auditory and read/write, while also being the easiest for teachers to plan. Most teachers will also use a mix of different teaching styles and strategies throughout lessons as well, after the content has been delivered. However, most of the teaching in schools will be delivered in a traditional lecture style teaching method for the majority of the lesson, and as the students get older this teaching style is more commonly used. What does that look like for the common dyslexic child?

There are a number of modern teaching styles which are being used in the classroom (especially primary) that are starting to take over from the traditional lecture based teaching style. These styles are more focused on catering to individual needs and making sure that the lessons are as interactive as possible. The most common are:

- Flipped Classroom
- Multi-sensory learning
- VAK Learning
- Project-Based Learning
- Problem-Based Learning
- Collaborative Learning
- Cooperative Learning
- Game-Based Learning
- Inquiry-Based Learning
- Thinking-Based Learning
- Competency-Based Learning
- Independent Learning

(Koumadoraki, 2022)

These styles aim at taking more of a student-led approach that encourages more independent learning, critical thinking and group work when in lessons. These offer a great way for learners who do not deal with read/writing based learning well. Many studies have been done, testing which one of these methods is best tailored to the dyslexia way of learning. I will briefly explain the ones most used with dyslexic students, how they look in a classroom setting and some of the advantages and criticisms.

Flipped classroom

The flipped classroom approach is a student led strategy which allows them to dictate how they access and learn the information with the teacher only there for guidance. This strategy is one of the most popular when looking at dyslexic learning, as it aligns well with the dyslexic style of learning and allows them to stay away from styles that do not suit them. Yongyi Chen's Flipped Classroom method study on dyslexia, he concluded that:

Flipped classrooms make learning easier for people with dyslexia through audiovisual stimulation. And flipped classroom also allows people with dyslexia to repeat classes according to their learning needs. With the opportunity to repeat lessons, dyslexics can absorb the same knowledge as their peers. Thus reducing the difference between dyslexic learners and normal learners, which can improve students' overall performance.

(Chen, 2021)

Based on this study it is easy to see the benefits of a flipped classroom teaching style for dyslexic students. However, it does have a lot of drawbacks as well. Using this style you have to place a lot of trust in your students, which means for some teachers this may not be a possible teaching style. Also, this method would have to be combined with others to make it as effective as possible, as they would potentially need prior knowledge or a lot of guidance.

Multi-Sensory

As implied, this style aims to deliver the content in a range of different mediums that is not solo reliant on read/write. It can use a mixture of auditory, visual and kinesthetic learning means to keep the student focused and engaged. Also, physical objects and access to the tactile sensory is important when trying to explore multi-sensory learning.

Multi-sensory learning is a great tool for one-on-one sessions or small group based interventions as it can be targeted learning for those individuals. This strategy is somewhat less suited to whole class based learning as it may require more sense and (like with most teaching styles) this approach does not suit every child (Reid, 2005).

Dyslexia in the classroom

As previously discussed, the dyslexic mind operates in a very different way to the “neurotypical mind”, and dyslexic students will cope very differently to the traditional method of teaching. This can lead to a number of different problems if it goes unrecognised or supported such as; falling behind in their studies and struggling to catch up, lack of confidence and unwillingness to take part in class discussions and low self esteem (Martinelli, 2022). This lack of confidence in their own ability at a young age can cause a ripple effect through their educational life. The teaching style that the person is exposed to can be an unconscious factor to this initial lack of belief, over time if left unattended to the person may start building up an early resentment for learning as a whole. Jacky Ridsdale makes this point surrounding the school syllabus, stating that, “As the vast majority of the school curriculum is literacy based, however, a case could therefore be made that as literacy skills are so pervasive, failure here and concomitant low “literacy” self-esteem, will impact all, or most, other areas of academic self-esteem.” (Ridsdale, 2005) Dyslexic students (especially at a young age) can also hide the fact they are struggling and find it embarrassing to talk about, especially if they are far behind their peers in terms of reading and writing.

Jonathan Glazzard conducted an interview based study looking at the impact of dyslexia on self-esteem on 9 different pupils. Even though it was a small sample size, it was a very interesting study and I would urge any parent of dyslexic children to read it⁸. The three main categories that the students categorise their feelings in were; disappointment, isolation and stupid. Each one of them described their feelings in the classroom during lessons, one student detailing “I pretty much felt I was stupid and I had something wrong with me”, while another said “Well I felt like kind of disappointed with myself because I couldn’t do stuff, so because I couldn’t do it, I just didn’t bother doing it”. The study concluded: “The data in this study indicates that for learners with dyslexia, the official diagnosis is critical in order to develop self-concept and self-esteem...Negative interactions from peers and teachers towards learners with dyslexia resulted in low self-esteem and feelings of isolation”.

Identifying dyslexia

Children can show signs of dyslexia from a very early age, however, they do not often get their diagnosis until later on in life. There are some key areas to look out if you feel that a student you work with or your children has dyslexia. The Dyslexic Association of London outlines that these as the main signs to look out for in younger children:

⁸ Can be found in the bibliography.

- Difficulty following instructions
- Forgetful with words or unable to recognise words that are familiar to them
- Stronger oral skills than written work
- Poor comprehension skills
- Disorganised

As a child gets older however it can be harder to see these signs, and the indicators of dyslexia can become more specific. If a child has gone undiagnosed with dyslexia in their early education, and their reading and writing skills are of their age group, it is still important to get a diagnosis if they show other signs. They may be struggling a lot more in their studies than they communicate and they will have access to additional help and teaching methods that suit their learning style. Some of the signs of dyslexia in later life can be:

- Confusing words
- Confusing right and left
- Clear difficulties processing information
- Disorganised
- Much stronger knowledge than is able to express in written form

(Dyslexia Association of London 2023)

The positives of dyslexia

Dyslexia is not all doom and gloom, and despite having troubles with certain areas of life it can help in other, arguably more important, areas. It is well documented that dyslexic students have a stronger imagination, greater problem solving skills, 3D thinking and more emotional intelligence (Cole, 2019). Dyslexics also have the ability to process high amounts of information, if taught in the correct way. In the paper Not All Those Who Wander are Lost: Examining the Character Strengths of Dyslexia published in the Journal of Global Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities, they stated "Research has demonstrated that individuals with dyslexia have particularly high-level reasoning that consists of superior mental reasoning, interconnected reasoning, narrative reasoning and dynamic reasoning" (p1. Kannangara, 2018). Highlighting the point that dyslexics are not "stupid" but just need to access different learning methods in order to reach their full potential.

Conclusion

In conclusion, understanding the needs of students with dyslexia in a classroom environment is crucial for creating an inclusive educational experience. The broad spectrum of symptoms necessitates a personalised approach to support. Traditional teaching methods may not align with a dyslexic student's needs. However, strategies such as the flipped classroom, multi-sensory learning and project-based learning have shown promise in accommodating these needs.

Where possible, an early diagnosis of dyslexia is crucial. Undiagnosed dyslexia can lead to damaged self-esteem, educational struggles and feelings of isolation. It is important to highlight the positive attributes associated with dyslexia, such as creativity, problem-solving skills and emotional intelligence.

Overall, dyslexia should not be described as a learning difficulty but as an alternative learning style. Reading and writing are not what should be considered the main skills of intellectual people. If you understand how you can best progress information and make sure that you lean into your stronger attributes you will find that being dyslexic will no longer be a hindrance but a strength.

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