

# A short introduction to dyslexia

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This article opens a series of articles on specific problems with teaching dyslexic students. In the next issues of “The Teacher” you will find advice on how to help your dyslexic students overcome their difficulties in learning English vocabulary, grammar and language skills. The teaching methods that work with dyslexic students can make lessons fun for the whole class so knowing about dyslexia can be a benefit for everybody.

## What is dyslexia? <sup>1</sup>

Dyslexia is one of several distinct learning disabilities. It is a specific language-based disorder. It's of biological origin (usually genetic). Characteristic symptoms are difficulties in single word decoding (reading), usually reflecting insufficient phonological skills. Dyslexia is manifested by varying difficulty with different forms of language, often including, in addition to problems with reading, a conspicuous problem with acquiring proficiency in writing and spelling. These difficulties are often unexpected in relation to age and other intellectual and academic abilities (in some school subjects). These difficulties are not the result of a generalized developmental disability (these children have a normal IQ) or sensory impairment (they don't have seeing, hearing problems). Some dyslexic people have very good space orientation, visual, or auditory memory, technical skills.

## What dyslexia is not (myths about dyslexia):

- **Dyslexia is not a myth.** Although dyslexia isn't an illness it appears in two basic medical classifications of diseases: ICD-10 (European) and DSM-IV (American).
- **Dyslexia is not an illness.** It is a learning difficulty which makes all aspects of dealing with language (especially written

language) harder. Therefore it isn't possible to cure somebody of it with a pill. Most experts today agree that learning to write requires a lot of effort and takes time. Improvement can only be made in small steps. It's crucial for dyslexic students to learn how to learn, find out what works for them and what doesn't, as well as to develop their own learning strategies. Normally with time dyslexic students learn to compensate for their weak points using their talents (a good visual memory or manual skills etc.) and intelligence to cope with their problems.

- **Dyslexia is not a lack of intelligence.** Children who have been diagnosed as being dyslexic have at least a normal IQ and many of them are highly intelligent.
- **Dyslexia is not laziness.** However, some dyslexic students may be lazy and try to use their dyslexia as an excuse for not working. Therefore a wise teacher understands that helping means demanding and motivating, not releasing or absolving from responsibility.
- **Dyslexia is not 'no big deal'.** Children don't grow out of dyslexia. The dyslexic person learns to cope with his/her problems and to use favourable compensation strategies. The earlier help is given, the more effective it is. Constant failure leads to a lack of motivation and/or other negative strategies. These secondary effects are often more difficult to deal with later on. Early encouragement and learner training can therefore make all the difference to a dyslexic child's experience of school and learning.
- **Dyslexia is not something rare.** The problems associated with dyslexia are roughly similar in some 10 % of the population, which means that in an average classroom there are usually a few pupils with dyslexia.

- **Dyslexic students are not all the same.** In fact they differ a lot one from another. Some of them, having experienced some difficulties in learning their mother tongue, don't have any problems with foreign languages. Some – suffering from severe dyslexia – can hardly learn a foreign language.
- **The children don't normally grow out of dyslexia.** It is usually a problem for life. However the symptoms change with time and they are different at different life stages. Their form depends on different educational methods, work input and individual characteristics (intelligence, the character of deficits). The problems tend to come back after a break in training (e.g. after holidays) and in stressful situations (e.g. an exam).
- **Dyslexia is not a reason for failing in life,** which is proved by a long list of famous dyslexics (e.g. Hans Chrystian Andersen, Auguste Rodin, Thomas Alva Edison, Sir Winston Churchill, Albert Einstein, Jacek Kuroń). Dyslexic children can succeed at school – they just need the right kind of teaching.

Most of the Polish dyslexia researchers distinguish between **Developmental Dyslexia** in its general meaning as a syndrome of Specific Reading and Writing Difficulties and its forms: **dyslexia** (in its narrow meaning with reference to reading problems only), **disortography** (spelling problems) and **dysgraphia** (handwriting problems).

#### What is the cause of dyslexia?

Different factors (genetic, environmental etc.) cause biological changes in the central nervous system which leads to certain dysfunctions. As a result the child's psycho-motor development is discordant.

**In the case of most primary students with dyslexia their weaknesses can be identified in the following areas:**

- **Visual and auditory perception and processing**  
These can result in difficulties with mastering written and sometimes also oral language: learning words/letters/sounds; spelling (phonic writing: e.g. football/futbol). Letters may be reversed, mirrored, replaced by similar ones

(e.g. p-b-d-g, w-m-n), written in the wrong order (e.g. hlep/help), omitted or added. Dyslexic symptoms in primary school usually also concern: reading (because of difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition); pronunciation (because this requires good auditory perception and processing); expressive writing; recognising and producing rhymes.

- **Automaticity**  
For example, applying even well-known spelling rules, retrieving common words from memory.
- **Memory**  
Dyslexic students may encounter problems with: short term memory, learning sequences such as days of the week and months of the year, acquiring the knowledge of sounds and words.
- **Motor skills**  
Dyslexic students may have illegible handwriting and a slow pace of writing. They may also have insufficient fine motor skills, which result in problems with manual tasks (e.g. tying shoelaces, using scissors and glue).
- **Sensory-motor co-ordination**  
For example, a child may not like drawing and his/her art work shows this deficit.
- **Spatial orientation**  
Students may have trouble differentiating between left and right. They may find prepositions difficult (e.g. under, on, above, below etc.).
- **Concentration**  
Dyslexic children may get easily distracted and become mentally tired sooner than their peers.
- **Organisational skills**  
Dyslexic children may have problems with time management (e.g. often coming late for a lesson, planning their work) as well as difficulties with organisation of materials (e.g. problems with using their student book as the source of useful information, designing the layout of their copybook).
- **Maths**  
Students with dyslexia tend to have trouble with arithmetic, mathematical symbols, commas, the number of zeros etc.
- **Learning notational skills (music)**

**Secondary consequences of dyslexia can be:** low self-esteem, low motivation for learning, frustration, being passive (withdrawn),

becoming aggressive as a form of protest (tantrums) or playing a classroom clown. Many dyslexic children do not enjoy learning. Some hate school or even refuse to go to classes. Most of the general dyslexia symptoms (listed above) affect students' performance in English lessons. **Typical problem areas in English are:**

- **The alphabet**, which results in problems with spelling aloud and using dictionaries.
- **Vocabulary** because of poor memory and problems with sequences (e.g. learning the 12 months). Dyslexics often experience difficulties with retrieving well-known words from memory. Therefore if a dyslexic student is asked to translate a Polish word into English and doesn't know the answer straight away it doesn't necessarily mean that he/she hasn't learnt it.
- **Grammar** – even applying well-known rules.
- **All four skills:**
  - **listening** (because it requires good concentration span and memory, auditory perception and processing)
  - **reading** (because it requires good visual and auditory perception and processing, accurate and/or fluent word recognition)
  - **speaking** – less often (because of problems with automaticity, memory and constructing complex sentences)
  - **expressive writing** (because of the semantic, morphological and syntactic aspect of the language). Dyslexics usually have problems with planning their essays. They also tend to write short, simple sentences and overuse high-frequency words. In addition they make all types of mistakes.
- **Spelling** (because it requires good phonological skills, auditory and visual perception and processing, memory and automaticity). Dyslexic students may confuse, leave out, add letters and syllables as well as change their order.
- **The technique of writing:** in the case of students with dysgraphia their handwriting can be illegible and the pace of writing slow (because writing requires proper fine motor skills).
- **Pronunciation**, e.g. pronouncing long words (because this requires good short-

term memory, auditory perception and processing).

- **Interference:** the child can mix all the foreign languages that he/she is learning, especially German and English.
- **Spatial orientation:** telling left from right, prepositions (e.g. under, on, above, below etc.).
- **Concentration**
- **Organisational skills** (e.g. time management, poor organisation of materials)
- **Possible behaviour problems.**

### The rights of dyslexic children

The children who have a statement of dyslexia (!) according to the policy have their rights. It is a teacher's duty, not a matter of good will, to respect them. These are:

- **The teacher is obliged to adjust his/her demands** to his/her students' individual psycho-physical and educational needs on the basis of the written assessment in which it has been stated the student has certain dysfunctions<sup>2</sup>.
- **The director of school can release a student with severe dyslexia from learning a second foreign language** on condition it was earlier proposed by his/her parents or a legal carer or on the basis of the written assessment<sup>3</sup>.

### General rules on how to deal with dyslexia

*'In my experience, it is the continual sense of failure that makes the whole experience of dyslexia so negative. Obviously, when learning a foreign language in a regular classroom, dyslexic learners experience more problems than their non-dyslexic counterparts, but if you give them sufficient structure, time and practice to acquire the basics on all levels (reading, writing, speaking, comprehension) they can make progress. Mixed with non-dyslexics who learn easily in an intuitive, global way, the dyslexic learner will only experience failure through not receiving enough positive feedback: under this pressure he will start mixing and confusing his words in an effort to keep up' (Language Shock – Dyslexia across cultures, 1999).*

### Psychological aspects:

- Since **children with dyslexia often have low motivation** a teacher should be positive and

optimistic as well as to encourage them to have a positive attitude towards English. It is vital for teachers to remember that motivation is the key to self-esteem and to success. One of the ways to motivate dyslexic students, most of whom are better in spoken than in written English is to help them to get in contact with the English speaking countries' cultures (e.g. writing to a pen-friend, going on a holiday, getting in touch with native speakers, taking part in student exchange).

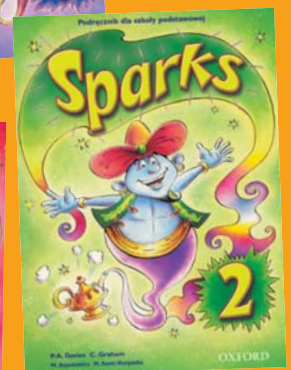
- Since **children with dyslexia usually have a low self-esteem** a teacher should accept the fact that such students usually need more understanding and support than others, because of difficulties they experience at school. A teacher should remember that learners with dyslexia need a lot of positive feedback and praise as well as ensure that his/her students with dyslexia achieve some form of success. It's not a good idea to spend all the time working on their problems,

forgetting about their strengths. It is important for the teacher to remember that sometimes it is better to go back a step and give the pupil a sense of achievement than to stay on a higher level without success because a stressed child is not an effective student.

- **Dyslexic students don't usually believe in themselves.** Therefore a teacher should not be over-protective. Dyslexic students need help but only 'help that leads to self-help'. The teacher shouldn't constantly sit next to the child. The teacher's job is to encourage the child to be independent. A good teacher has high expectations but at the same time sets reasonable goals. It is advisable to praise the child for trying hard even if he or she doesn't quite succeed with the task.
- **Students with dyslexia may have problems with their classmates.** Therefore a teacher first of all should explain the situation of the dyslexic person to the rest of

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Fot. Sylva Villerot

the students in order to increase their sympathy for the child. The teacher's duty is to protect dyslexic children from bullying from their classmates and promote mutual help between students. Laughing at or discriminating against the child is inadvisable. However, since the dyslexic child takes up a lot of the teacher's time, it is important that the other students don't miss out.

#### Organisational matters:

- A teacher should always remember that **most parents are experts concerning their children**. It is important to get/keep in touch with dyslexic students' family. It is advisable for a teacher to show his/her willingness to help in co-operation with the parents.
- A good teacher studies his/her students' **written assessments**. They can be an important source of information about our pupils' strong and weak points. From such documents a teacher can also find out how to work with his/her dyslexic student.

- It is a good idea to find out about dyslexic students' ways of learning (especially their learning style) and respect them. Every child has individual preferences for visual, auditory, tactile or kinaesthetic processing. In addition some children prefer to work alone and some with others in groups.

#### General rules on how to teach dyslexic students<sup>4</sup>

*'If the dyslexic child does not learn the way you teach, Can you teach him the way he learns?'*  
(H. T. Chasty – consultant in learning abilities and difficulties)

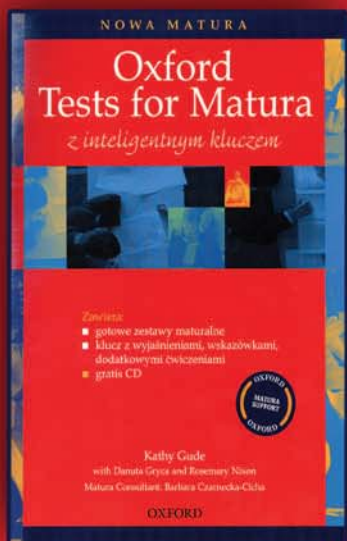
- Remember that dyslexic children are especially demanding students. Therefore:
  - Apply an individual approach (It is important to recognise the uniqueness and the individuality of each student: what works well for one child may not necessarily work for another).
  - **Revise!!!**
  - Find ways to help your students concentrate.
    - Change the activity regularly.
    - Plan lessons including short breaks (dyslexic children can only concentrate for short periods at a time).
    - Don't learn things that are similar one after the other
  - **Learn to be well-organized.** Dyslexic students need a regular routine and help with organising things.
  - **Accentuate the child's abilities and teach through his strengths.** Difficulties in reading and writing might be compensated by abilities such as a high IQ or visual/technical skills.
  - Give exact instructions or explanations of tasks (short and concise)
  - Let your students learn by doing  
Ask them to prepare vocabulary charts, flashcards, posters etc.
- Use friendly material:
  - large fonts (12-14 e.g. Comic Sans MS)
  - a clear layout. The page should be well laid out and not too full
  - pictograms & graphics to help locate information
  - picture dictionaries
  - consistent color coding
  - listening material (tape) used at home
  - 'window marker' for reading.

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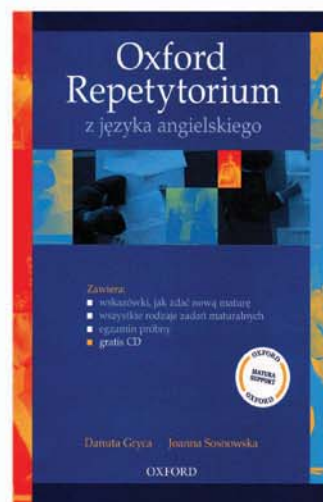
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It helps dyslexic children with reading. A student should hold it in such a position that the word that is being read appears in the opening (window). This way a student won't get lost while reading.

PM A	

- **Apply a multisensory approach.** The same item/s should be introduced in different ways, using different senses: sight, hearing, but also smell, touch and taste). Therefore ask your students to: look, listen, say; listen and sing; look, point and say; look, listen and read; say, touch and smell.
- **Try a variety of techniques:**
  - *drama*
  - *visual images*
  - *use of rhymes and rhythm (chants, raps)*
  - *families of words*
  - *associations: support for short-term memory*
  - *personal choice of topic*
  - *teach your students different spelling patterns (English isn't an easy language to learn because it isn't 'transparent' – English spelling isn't consistent!).*
- **Make your lessons more enjoyable by using:**
  - nursery rhymes and poetry
  - miming stories
  - puzzles
  - games: *Simon says, Snakes & ladders, Bingo* (helps visual perception), spot the difference (also to help with prepositions: over/under)
  - Make things in class (e.g. board games)
  - Tape everyday sounds and play to students (Can they recognize them?).

These methods probably sound familiar to most (good!) English teachers, who will have been using them successfully while working with their non-dyslexic students. In fact they will not do any harm to 'regular' students. On the contrary, they are bound to help them, since the practice of teaching the English language to dyslexics has been based on techniques that are easily digestible (i.e. are clear and not complex) as well as those which

most stimulate cognitive processes: memory, attention and auditory language functions (e.g. a multisensory approach, mnemotechniques).

In my next article, which will be written in Polish, I am going to concentrate on the organisational and technical aspects of teaching English to dyslexic students. I am planning to explain to teachers how to read and understand written assessments of dyslexic students' work (there will be a glossary of the most difficult terms included) and give advice on how to cooperate with dyslexic students' parents, as well as how to treat and evaluate students with dyslexia.

<sup>1</sup> definition written by ODS Research Committee and National Institutes of Health (1994)

<sup>2</sup> Rozporządzenie MENiS z dnia 7 września 2004 r. (rozdz. 1, § 6).

<sup>3</sup> Rozporządzenie MENiS z dnia 7 września 2004 r. (rozdz. 1, § 9).

<sup>4</sup> The part 'The general rules about how to teach dyslexic students' is based on the material prepared by D. Sapiejewska (2002).

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