

FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND DYSLEXIA

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Foreign language learning presents young people today with the opportunity to communicate with non-English speaking peers on equal terms: to use the gift of communication to promote a common understanding and share visions and plans for the future. It is not simply an ideological educational theory designed to gain acceptance of a common curriculum for schools. However if we are to promote the idea of foreign language learning for all, we must question if it is really possible to give all our young people access to this area of the curriculum and if we can make the experience a worthwhile one which results in effective learning. If we can answer, "Yes" to this question, then the next question will inevitably be "HOW"?

Why should dyslexic students learn another language?

For dyslexic students who have struggled to learn their own language, and who may still be coming to terms with the finer points of reading and writing, we must ensure we are not imposing an unbearable burden that could result in further failure, demotivation and subsequent behaviour problems. True inclusion in the modern languages classroom is about much more than having a presence and being exposed to another language. It is about feeling accepted and involved in a worthwhile learning experience whatever the level that can be achieved.

The benefits of learning another language are fairly clear: an extended range of employment and recreational opportunities, as well as the less tangible benefits of achieving a closer understanding of others by communicating in the other language instead of just their own. By depriving any young people of such opportunities, we may create the anxiety we seek to avoid.

Should all dyslexic students study another language?

One dilemma which we face is whether we should present all young people with a common modern language curriculum irrespective of any additional support needs which they may have, or deprive students of what may prove to be a worthwhile and satisfactory learning experience. The difficulty in solving the dilemma is one that permeates educational practice. All young people are not the same, and all dyslexic young people are not the same! Because one young dyslexic person succeeds does not mean every dyslexic young person will. What works for one may not work for another.

Early research into the learning of another language suggested that because dyslexic children normally manage to cope with the spoken and listening aspects of their own language, there was no reason why they would not cope with a foreign language. This has not generally proved to be the case however as my own research has found (Crombie, 1995; 1997; 2003).

The environment in which dyslexic pupils learn their own language is generally quite different from the classroom conditions which most children experience in the teaching and learning situation. Total immersion which exists for children learning English in English – speaking schools, does not exist in many classrooms, and it is only when children attend specific language schools or go to live in another country that they have a chance of reaching anywhere near the level of immersion which they had for their first language.

The age at which immersion takes place too may be a critical factor in producing the most favourable climate for learning. There are few schools which teach foreign languages to children under the age of eight.

Trying to anticipate learning abilities

The level of a child's difficulties in English language may give an indication of the likely difficulties in foreign language learning, but it is certainly not the only indicator. Motivation, attitude, learning style, self esteem and determination are as always crucial to learning. If we can convince young people to believe in themselves, we may make the difference between success and failure. Even when all the motivational and attitudinal conditions are right, there is still the possibility that we may not succeed in achieving the learning we hoped. Because of the phonological difficulties which the vast majority of dyslexic pupils exhibit, there are likely to be problems with the phonology or the new language. Auditory discrimination may be problematic.

There are other reasons too why dyslexic pupils differ in their learning abilities. Processing time is a crucial factor. The fact that dyslexic pupils often take more time to process language information is one which has been substantiated by research (Ackerman & Dykman, 1996). We cannot therefore expect dyslexic pupils to absorb information at the same pace as their peers. Slowing the pace at which we expect dyslexic pupils to speak or listen in the foreign language may not be exactly natural but it does give the dyslexic student time to process during the initial stages of learning.

Working memory and short-term memory difficulties that affect dyslexic pupils' learning could be expected to affect foreign language learning. If a young person has difficulty in accessing a word such as "hospital" and instead says, "hopsital", this muddling of polysyllabic words which is not unexpected in dyslexic people generally is likely to overlap into the new language.

Short-term memory difficulties make it likely that learning vocabulary too will pose problems for the dyslexic learner. Combined with the extra time required to access words from memory, the pupil may have problems in maintaining concentration for sufficient time to decode, comprehend and respond. This factor of requiring extra time may remain until the pupil reaches the stage of being able to think in the other language.

Pupils who have mild difficulties in learning to read, write and master the phonology of their own language, may find some difficulty in tackling whatever foreign language they choose, but will probably reach a reasonable standard if they persist. At the early stages of learning the new language progress may be quite acceptable. However, as the demands rise, memory may become overloaded, and if the pupils do not understand the necessary strategies and techniques to employ, what was initially a pleasurable experience can become extremely

stressful, with the possibility of breakdown not just in learning but also in motivation and self-esteem.

The Challenges for teachers

For teachers, the challenge is to find the most effective methods of teaching foreign languages to dyslexic pupils as well as all the others in the class. Research from the United States which emphasises a systematic structured approach to a multisensory nature, suggests that this is the most effective method for poor language learners. This Multisensory Structured Language (MSL) approach is described by Ganschow, Sparks & Schneider (1995) in the International Dyslexia Journal and for those who are interested in using these techniques the article is necessary reading.

Methods

The MSL approach is based on the work of Gillingham and Stillman (1960) and is not unlike the type of approach recommended for teaching first language skills to dyslexic students. Grammar, syntax, and language phonology require to be taught through a programme that emphasises hearing, seeing, speaking and writing the language. A major challenge to teachers is of course to determine how these methods can be employed in a busy modern languages classroom. One answer is to use the techniques with a whole group of pupils so that in addition to the direct teaching being given, students can also practise among themselves to give the overlearning necessary for retention. Methods should explicitly teach correspondence between written aspects and the sounds they make.

Strategies

The following strategies are likely to be helpful to many students, not just those with dyslexia:

- Adopting a metacognitive approach

Thinking about and understanding the language structure.
Understanding the way in which they learn.

- Analogous reading

The notion of onset and rime can be extended to languages other than English though is clearly not suitable for all languages. Make use of words which fit into families to minimise the need for new learning: e.g. bright, sight, might, light in English; plage, nage, fromage in French.

- Modelling

Involves someone in acting as a model while the student follows. Reading along with the tutor helps the student gain confidence. Paired or peer tutoring . Taping of a passage which the student can take away and follow at home.

- Training in auditory discrimination

Listen for the sound in a word – where in the word do you hear specific sounds? Using a series of pictures or picture cards – sort into piles - do you hear a specific sound in the word?

➤ Memory training

The use of specific memory techniques. Mnemonics.

➤ Overlearning

Currently the use of computer, CDRoms, DVDs, video, audiotape, Language Master etc. Increasingly on-line learning will become important with material that can be downloaded and then worked on as often as the pupil wishes and can manage.

➤ Use of motivating material/Games

Attractive flashcards. Computer

➤ Technology

Perimeter Audio Learning Equipment (PALE system), translators, Quicktionary pen, word processors, computer games, MP3 players

➤ Learning Styles

Taking account of how a pupil or student learns best – small group, individually, seating position, light sensitivity, motivational factors etc.

Which language?

Languages which are similar phonologically to English may be slightly easier for English speaking learners. Spanish therefore may be slightly preferable to French for dyslexic pupils. However this is unlikely to be the only factor, and we need to consider how the students will approach Spanish if none of their peer group is studying it and they see no use for the language when they leave school. If however, Spanish is on equal terms with English, then it could be the preferable option.

What's best?

Having considered a number of issues and considered the options, there is still no easy answer to my initial questions. We cannot generalise from one dyslexic student to another. Language learning is unlikely to be easy for any dyslexic student but few areas of school learning are for most. Appropriate teaching will undoubtedly make an enormous difference. Clearly structured teaching of the type generally recommended for teaching native language skills may make language learning very much more comprehensible to the dyslexic student.

It seems the message therefore is that while all dyslexic learners are at risk of encountering difficulties in the foreign language classroom, close monitoring will ensure that these difficulties are minimised. For most dyslexic learners there should be some success. If however, the learning situation becomes intolerable and students find themselves totally unable to master even the most elementary aspects of a foreign language, then alternatives may need to be considered. Finding a more appropriate alternative within the curriculum could cause major problems for timetabling and supervision, but is very necessary if the

stress and frustration felt by an otherwise capable student is not to be allowed to adversely affect behaviour and self-image. With imagination and persistence the right alternative can be found and many difficulties overcome.

When the decision is made to proceed with foreign language learning, this will have to be kept under regular review. It has to be noted, however, that if it is decided appropriate for a pupil to be withdrawn from learning a foreign language, there will be no easy way of reintegrating the pupil back into the programme later when classmates will have moved on. It is desirable that dyslexic students be given awareness of the culture of the country whose language they have been studying. The early stages of language teaching will introduce cultural aspects as well as the language. Some dyslexic pupils will go on to enjoy their language learning albeit they may struggle at times to keep up with their peer group. Others will be unable to maintain the programme. It is important for these student that we are ready to find alternatives before any lasting damage is done to overall motivation and self-esteem.

The importance of language specialists and additional support for learning staff understanding the likely difficulties which dyslexic students may experience is vital if dyslexic students are to reach their potential in all languages, including their own. Considerable collaboration will be required to reach a fuller understanding of the most appropriate methodologies for dyslexic students. Further research into foreign language learning will be required if we are to be assured of the most appropriate and best solutions. It looks as though we are already discovering that methods which are best for dyslexic pupils work for most if not all others. Dyslexic pupils however are likely to need more of them for a longer time to reach success. Variety is one key if we are to prevent dyslexic students from reaching the point of boredom!

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