

ELT



Ireland bulletin

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Email us to write for the next ELT Ireland Bulletin!

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Supporting Students with Learning Difficulties

By Marianne Jordan (Consultant, Teacher, Trainer and Author)

Many learning disabilities start in early childhood. It is essential to identify these as soon as possible to get the appropriate help. By the time they come to an ELT lesson, they may have found ways to cope with their learning difficulties and also ways to hide them.

This article will outline the main types of learning difficulties and impediments that may affect your English language learners. I will include my personal and teaching experience tips and general and specific ways to support your students in a classroom or online (remembering we are professional ELT teachers, not qualified therapists).

Common signs that a student may have learning difficulties include:

Problems with reading, writing, calculating, memorising, following directions and paying attention.

It would be best to identify students with learning difficulties at enrolment. Some students will readily give this information others will try to hide it. Explain you are only asking this information to help them learn better and ensure the confidentiality of this information and it is essential their teacher knows this to help them with their learning. Teachers will need time and resources to get the support they need and to prepare ahead of the lessons.

English language students have many learning challenges with the English language due to irregular spelling and pronunciation. There are many rules and many exceptions. Rules and exceptions are confusing enough, but even more so for students with learning difficulties.

Main Types of Learning Difficulties

The three types of learning disabilities are reading disabilities, written language disabilities and maths disabilities.

The most common learning difficulties include:

Dyslexia affects the skills needed for accurate and fluent reading and spelling.

Dysgraphia is a neurological disorder that affects the production of written language.

Dyscalculia is a disorder that affects maths capabilities.

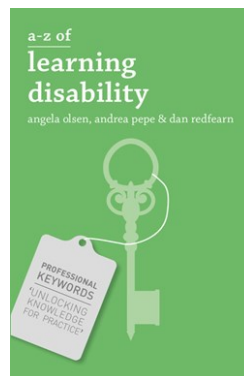
ADHD stands for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. (ADD = Attention Deficit Disorder.)

Processing Deficits affect the ability to process information from the senses.

Helpful tips: Dyslexia

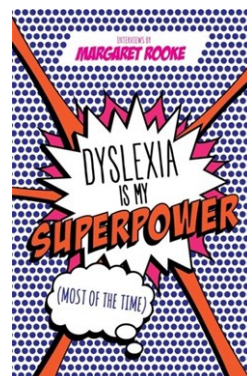
Here are some things to consider when working with learners who are dyslexic to help them develop the skills needed for accurate and fluent reading and spelling: Lighting, Reading Aloud, Audiobooks, Written work, Memorising, Positive Reinforcement and give hope.

Lighting - Consider changing Fluorescent lighting in classrooms (or suggest to online students) to something with less glare or fitting fluorescent light covers to avoid eye stress, strain and fatigue. **Reading Aloud** - ask for volunteers to read with groups of students, rather than selecting students (one of them just might be trying to hide their reading problems). **Audiobooks** - will help them to read along with the audio to match the text. **Written Work** - expect less, let them type their answers/homework or ask them to talk about their ideas/findings. **Memorising** - Encourage the use of flashcards and visuals and to use their own words rather than rote learning. When my son had Irlen syndrome (similar to Dyslexia), he rote learned the test questions' answers. I suggested he ask the teacher if he could write the answers in his own words instead of copying down definitions from his books. The teacher replied - "Of course, because then I will know, for sure, that you understand what you have learned!" **Positive Reinforcement** - to recognise their (hard-earned) achievements. Just because it takes longer to do something, it does not mean they can't learn it. **Give Hope** - Give examples of famous people with Dyslexia that have done very well in life. Orlando Bloom, Richard Branson, Tom Cruise, Walt Disney, Whoopi Goldberg, Keira Knightly, Jamie Oliver, Pablo Picasso, Keanu Reeves, Steven Spielberg.



A-Z of learning disability by A Olsen, A Pepe & D Redfearn

Easons Online



Dyslexia is my Superpower (most of the time) by M Rooke

Easons Online



Richard Branson

Wikipedia commons

Helpful tips: Dysgraphia	Helpful tips: Dyscalculia
Model - using clay to model letters, with young learners, can help form a letter before writing it.	Reduce - break it down into smaller parts.
Feel - using a finger to trace the letters in the air to feel their shape and form.	Realia - use real-life examples (shopping lists, sharing something into smaller pieces)
Big Letters - writing larger letters helps with letter formation.	Draw - make a diagram so students can visualise the problem and solution.
Say it - it is useful to get the students to say something first before writing it.	Discuss - talk about the problem and solutions.
	Review - short chunks often.

Helpful tips: ADHD	Helpful tips: Processing Deficits
Position - invite the student to sit at the front of the class to avoid distractions.	Learners with processing deficits find it challenging to understand the information presented to them aurally and visually.
Encourage - using a calendar, a to-do list and alarms to help the student stay focused and organised.	Talk slowly and clearly.
Chunk - divide tasks into pieces or smaller tasks and do one at a time.	Give written instructions to reinforce oral instructions.
Colour code - using highlighter pens for grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, skills.	Use visuals during teaching lessons.
Praise - acknowledge the effort the student made to complete a task.	Provide written feedback.

Helpful tips: Presenting information visually

Read directions aloud.
Give oral instructions.
Allow students to record oral instructions so they can listen to them again later.
Use colour when writing on the board to differentiate between questions and answers or colour code grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation notes.
As for all ELT learners, make the learning fun and engaging for students with learning disabilities



Michael Phelps, ADHD

Wikipedia commons

Main Types of Learning Impediments

Hearing loss affects receptive and expressive communication skills (listening, speaking and pronunciation). Speech defects include stuttering/stammering, mispronouncing sounds. Accents can deter students from participating if they think their pronunciation is not good enough or shows their social status. Diversity (racial, ethnic, gender, sexuality, religious, age) can deter students from participating if they feel they are different, subordinate or stereotyped.

Hearing Loss

I had a Spanish Student with slight hearing loss. I recognised some of the sounds, tone and clarity lost in her language and for all other languages of deaf speakers. The 'Listen and Repeat' method was difficult for her, but she benefited greatly from learning how to make the sounds using her lips, teeth, tongue and feeling for voiced and unvoiced sounds. She would

then say the word, and I confirmed I could understand her. She also found that learning the IPA and reading this in dictionaries was often more useful than the audio buttons.

Helpful tips:

Get their attention - say the student's name or tap them on the shoulder before you start speaking to them. **Speak clearly** and face to face - A hard of hearing student needs to see your lips and facial expressions. Good lighting and being at the same level is also helpful. **Speak at an average volume** - Just as some people speak louder to foreigners, there is no need to speak louder to a hard of hearing ELT student. **Limit distractions** - Try to talk to the student in a quieter place, individually or after other students leave the room after the lesson.

Speech Defects

1. Stammering due to Dysarthria

I helped a young Lithuanian man with Dysarthria (a brain injury-related speech disorder causing slurring due to not controlling the tongue and voice box) and several broken bones due to a motor accident. He had to learn how to walk and talk again with physiotherapy in hospital. Then they sent him out for English language pronunciation help. I saw an advertisement in the local library looking for volunteers to help people with learning disabilities. I put my name down and was assigned this young man because of my experience in ELT. The library provided the room and materials. I met him once a week for a year. He needed to walk with a cane at the start, and he was very embarrassed and shy. He still had a bit of a stammer at the beginning of our sessions, but with a lot of patience and understanding, his self-esteem began to grow stronger. He could hear the sounds I was making, but he was unable to copy them. I explained how to make the sounds using his lips, tongue, jaw and voice box. He became more focused on his articulators to help produce the sounds he needed for English. By the end of the year, he could have a basic conversation in English without stammering. He was delighted and very grateful.

Helpful tips:

Understanding and kindness - will help make them comfortable and not embarrassed to try new sounds and words. Talk slower with fewer words at the beginning of the lesson to allow them time to listen and understand. **Repetition** - Repeat the target words/sentences a few extra times to process them before attempting to say them. **Patience** - give twice as much time as we would give to ELT learners without learning disabilities. Those minutes of waiting for the ELT learner with Dysarthria can seem like hours. They often apologise, or make hand gestures to indicate they need more time (nod and smile and say or sign to show it's ok). Even if they only manage to say a few new words at the end of the lesson first lesson, their look of achievement is worth every one of those minutes that seemed like hours. **Focus** - focus on the effort of making the words rather than the stammer.

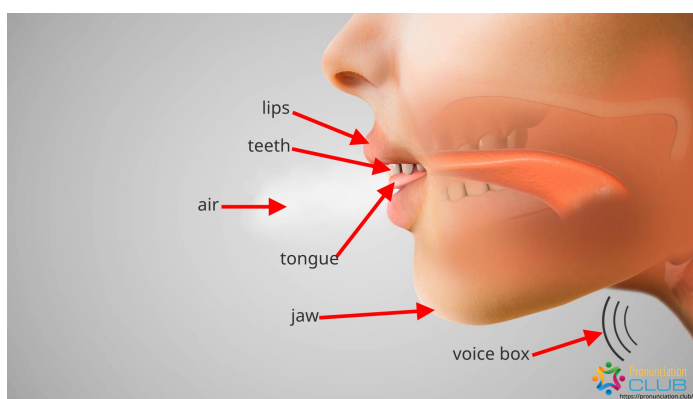
2) Lisp Another student had a lisp caused by saying the sounds /s/ and /z/ as the /th/ sound.

Helpful tips:

The /th/ sound is one of the more difficult sounds for most learners of English. I first explained that the sound he was making was the /th/ sound and gave him a selection of words with the /th/ at the beginning, middle and end. Then I showed him where to place his tongue, teeth, lips and jaw for the /s/ and /z/ and then sample words for those as for the /th/. Learning the difference between the /th/ and the /s/ and /z/ helped him retain the /th/, which was not in his language but needed for English.

Accents

Accents can deter students from participating if they think their pronunciation is not good enough or shows their social status. Diversity (racial, ethnic, gender, sexuality, religious, age) can deter students from participating if they feel they are different, subordinate or stereotyped. Accents and diversity are not physical learning impediments, but they can interfere with learning if they feel different or too embarrassed to contribute to the lesson.



Articulators

Pic by Pronunciation Club

Helpful tips:

Explain the key to speaking any language is intelligibility. When other people can understand you, and you understand them, this is successful communication. Remind them that their accent is part of their culture, identity and who they are. Include diversity in your handouts and wall posters showing respect for race, gender, sexuality, religion and age. Focus on what we all have in common. Learn about each other's cultures by getting the students to present their countries and cultures to the rest of the class.

All students with any learning disabilities will benefit from the Flipped Classroom and Blended Learning methods to prepare before the lesson, study at their own pace and revise at home.

Links

<https://www.sess.ie>
<https://dyslexia.ie/> (Accessed 29/01/2021)
<https://adhdireland.ie/for-adults/>
<https://www.tcd.ie/disability/teaching-info/awareness-info/learning.php>
<https://www.madebydyslexia.org/>



Marianne Jordan is a teacher, teacher trainer, author and pronunciation consultant. Marianne is the author of "Phonetics for Learners of English Pronunciation", "Learning English in Ireland" and other Irish cultural resources for TEFL Resources Ireland, phonics author of "English for Plurilingual Schools" 3-5 years and primary Primary 1-6 and the phonics consultant for Grupo SM, Spain. Marianne is currently writing and training online and blended learning pronunciation courses for Pronunciation.Club for all ages.



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