

Dyslexic Language Learners in Secondary Education

David Wilson

Today is the last annual review of Stephen Roberts' Statement of Special Educational Needs before he proceeds to Applehill Secondary School. Although Stephen is one of Cherryvale Primary School's brightest students, he has an educational psychologist's diagnosis of specific learning difficulties (SpLD), or dyslexia. Despite his best efforts, his reading and writing skills lag several years behind what might be expected of an individual of his age and ability. In the educational advice accompanying the Statement, his Head Teacher raises the spectre of "disapplication" of the modern foreign language (MFL) in the secondary school curriculum. She fears that the extra literacy demands of this new subject will frustrate Stephen. The Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) also favours Stephen's withdrawal from MFL lessons on the grounds that a different spelling system might undo her hard work teaching him sound-symbol correspondence in his own language. Mr Roberts wants his son to be pulled out of MFL lessons for specialist tuition designed to beat his dyslexia.

Another language?

Under the National Curriculum, Stephen is entitled to begin learning a foreign language when he enters secondary education. However, the rules provide for this entitlement to be "disapplied" in exceptional circumstances for periods of up to six months at a time. Such arrangements may continue indefinitely as long as they are reviewed at half-yearly intervals. So is disapplication an appropriate outcome for Stephen or should he study MFL alongside his peers? The adults at the annual review meeting seem convinced that disapplication is appropriate in Stephen's case. Other voices, however, remain to be heard: those of Applehill's head of MFL and of course Stephen himself. The former may be looking forward to the challenge of teaching her subject in a dyslexia-friendly, multisensory way. Stephen may want to share the experience of another language with his fellow students, perhaps with a modicum of discreet in-class support from a teaching assistant.

Which language?

The conventional wisdom is that arcane spelling rules make English one of the world's dyslexia-unfriendliest languages. Thanks to word-endings that can be read but not heard, French fares little better in the sound-symbol correspondence stakes. German and Spanish may be better prospects because they are relatively "phonetic" languages. Ease of learning, however, seldom determines which foreign language is taught first in schools, which is why they have not universally adopted Finnish with its straightforward orthography. Teacher supply, academic traditions and commercial or political interests tend to prevail. Stephen is likely to have the option of French or nothing unless his secondary school has "diversified" its provision to offer a choice of languages. In continental Europe, English will be compulsory for Étienne and Stefan, dyslexic or not. And those who experience difficulty with their first foreign language may be actively discouraged from starting a second, more appropriate, one.

Questions before answers

Nowadays, when time is a scarce commodity, it is very tempting to favour a “quick fix”, to jump to solutions before identifying and defining problems first. Some may argue, for example, that Stephen’s MFL course would meet his needs if he simply dispensed with its reading and writing components. Such arrangements are unlikely to be practicable or acceptable in school settings and the fact remains that dyslexia is about more than just literacy difficulties. Weak phonological processing skills, poor short-term memory, auditory sequencing problems and the like, often aggravated by low motivation, concentration and self-esteem, also underlie the condition, which manifests itself on a spectrum ranging in degree from mild to severe. Searching questions must be asked in advance about a dyslexic individual’s weaknesses and strengths if this specific learning difficulty, or difference, is to be appropriately accommodated in the MFL classroom.

From problems to solutions

In order to meet the needs of their students with SpLD, MFL teachers should:

- adopt a multisensory approach, engaging kinaesthetic as well as visual and auditory learning styles;
- present subject matter in a structured and explicit manner;
- divide lessons into digestible “bitesize chunks” with slower learning steps;
- provide opportunities for “overlearning” key points through a variety of follow-up activities;
- deploy memory strategies to assist vocabulary and grammar retention;
- make allowances for shorter concentration spans;
- show sensitivity when eliciting student responses;
- encourage metacognitive – “learning how to learn” – strategies and thinking skills to promote student autonomy;

- dispense praise and rewards to maintain motivation and self-esteem; and
- become reflective practitioners, observing and verifying how classroom interventions affect progress and complement individual strengths.

Fortunately, non-dyslexics can also profit from this *modus operandi*.

Exploiting technology

Screening software such as LASS Secondary (<http://www.lucid-research.com>) builds standardised graphical profiles of students’ cognitive and literacy skills, contributing to the identification of underlying memory and phonological difficulties. Technology can also support dyslexic language learners as they study.

- Using generic and tutorial software, they may progress at their own level and pace, making mistakes in privacy and interacting with a multisensory world where they can deploy their preferred learning styles, whether visual, auditory or kinaesthetic, at will.
- Spellcheckers, voice recognition, synthesised speech, word banks, on-screen grids and the like can make office applications more dyslexia-friendly. Many students with SpLD work best when their teacher sets tightly structured writing tasks necessitating a minimum of keyboarding.
- Settings controlling keyboard, sound, display and mouse options can be customised to students’ needs. Switches, overlay keyboards, touch-screens and other plug-ins offer data-entry alternatives to typing. Using Optical Character Recognition technology, paper-based text can be transferred from a scanner to a computer or decoded by a handheld “reading pen” (e.g. Quicktionary: <http://www.quick-pen.com>).

Building through teamwork

During the 1990s, the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research and National Curriculum Council project on languages and special needs “highlighted a difference in approach between ordinary and special schools (and) between MFL specialists and specialist teachers of pupils with SEN. The first group begins from the demands of the subject, the second from the individual needs of the particular pupil. Successful language learning for all pupils with SEN requires skilful and sensitive combination of these.” When subject teachers, special educational needs professionals and teaching assistants collaborate to make language learning a positive experience for the likes of Stephen, success will surely follow. In a recent European Commission report on languages and special needs, special school head teacher Keith Bovair argues that “the only ‘disabling’ conditions that our pupils have are low expectations and assumptions made by adults.”

Postscript

It is the evening of the Year 9 parents’ meeting at Pearmount School. Mr Coombs has a queue of parents waiting to see him. His next appointment is with Mrs Wallace. “Your daughter is my best student” he begins. “Angela listens attentively, works conscientiously and takes every aspect of the language well within her stride. I hope she is planning to continue with her German next year. She has every chance of a GCSE grade A in the subject if she keeps up her efforts!” A puzzled expression comes over Mrs Wallace’s face and she replies: “I’ve been to see the Special Educational Needs Coordinator and Angela’s English teacher, who are both worried about her progress. You do know that the school’s Educational Psychologist has just tested Angela and confirmed that she’s dyslexic?” Now, how do you think the conversation continues between Mr Coombs and Mrs Wallace?

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www.specialeducationalneeds.com

Further reading

MFL teachers working alone need not suffer in silence if they still lack confidence about what to do when a learner with SpLD appears in their class. For several years I have maintained an online bibliography of modern foreign languages and special educational needs at <http://www.specialeducationalneeds.com/mfl/biblio.doc> with a SpLD section now containing well over 400 Web and print references. Elke Schneider and Margaret Crombie have written an excellent guide for teachers entitled “Dyslexia and foreign language learning” published by David Fulton. Those seeking “hard research” about languages and learning disabilities are advised to read the articles of American psychologists Leonore Ganschow and Richard Sparks. In addition to this large body of literature, there are plenty of professional online forums dedicated to languages or special needs where expert advice and support are a keystroke away.